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MARINA YURLOVA TO-DAY

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# *COSSACK GIRL*

By

*MARINA YURLOVA*

WITH EIGHT ILLUSTRATIONS

CASSELL & CO., LTD.

LONDON

TORONTO



MELBOURNE

SYDNEY

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*First Edition* - May 1934  
*Second Edition* - May 1934  
*Third Edition* - May 1934  
*Fourth Edition* - June 1934

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY  
EBENEZER BAYLIS AND SON, LIMITED, THE  
TRINITY PRESS, WORCESTER, AND LONDON.

F10.634



## CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
1. INTERLUDE: 1915 - - - -	I
2. THE BEGINNING OF AN ADVENTURE	4
3. "MARIA KOLESNIKOVA" - - -	18
4. PARADE - - - - -	33
5. THE HUT - - - - -	40
6. PATROL - - - - -	47
7. FORAGE - - - - -	58
8. THE DEATH OF KOSEL - - -	68
9. AMPUTATION - - - - -	77
10. A COLONEL AND A DOCTOR - -	88
11. SCHEHEREZADE - - - - -	101
12. SKIRMISH - - - - -	109
13. DEATH IN THE SNOW - - -	117
14. THE GRAND DUKE STRIKES - -	135
15. THE GRAND DUKE - - - - -	154
16. FAMINE AND THIRST - - - -	171
17. INTERLUDE: 1917 - - - -	182
18. MURDER IN THE HILLS - - -	187
19. MICHAEL VERESCHENKO - - -	195
20. REVOLUTION: 1918 - - - -	206

CHAPTER	PAGE
21. PRISON IN KAZAN - - -	213
22. FLIGHT - - -	226
23. AN ASYLUM IN OMSK - - -	248
24. GOOD-BYE TO LOVE - - -	258
25. THE TRAIN STOPS - - -	264
26. ACROSS SIBERIA - - -	270
27. PROFITEER - - -	282
28. THE SMOLNY INSTITUTE GIRLS:1919 -	296
29. DEPARTURE - - -	310



## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

MARINA YURLOVA . . . TO-DAY	<i>Frontispiece</i>	
	FACING PAGE	
OFFICIAL INVALID LEAVE OF ABSENCE		
GRANTED TO MARINA YURLOVA - -		82
ARMENIAN REFUGEE CHILDREN - -		174
SOLDIERS AND CIVILIANS ON A TRAIN.		
BOLSHEVIK SOLDIERS: 1918 - -		198
AN EXECUTION IN KAZAN - - -		224
SCENES NEAR ANY SIBERIAN VILLAGE DURING THE GUERILLA WARFARE - -		266
AFTER THE BATTLE NEAR IRKUTSK -		278
THE AUTHOR BEFORE HER ESCAPE TO JAPAN		310



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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTERLUDE: 1915

MIDDAY in the Southern Caucasus. For a long fortnight it had been unbearably hot. The sun had turned the whole plain to a glaring, metallic yellow, across which, like a procession of black cinders, patch after patch of scorched brush crawled away to the horizon. To the east a mountain range danced interminably in the heat-haze, muttering to itself with an occasional low roll of thunder.

In the camp, like a symbol of the heat, a black cloud of flies hovered incessantly above the corral.

Drill was over for the morning. Men lay about in whatever patches of shade they could find or could manufacture. *Obied*, or mess, had been eaten. There was nothing to do.

I had wandered a little way beyond my own lines to get away from my companions, whose conversation was as wearisome to me as it seemed to be to them. There was nothing new to talk about—the rumours of battle, the gossip about home, the fears for the coming harvest, all these were as frayed as our own nerves. Nobody had the

energy to sing or even to quarrel; nobody laughed, nobody did anything but grumble.

My wound was paining me, but I would rather walk than sit still and let it nag. I went along, staring at the ground—there was really nothing to see but the same groups of men, lying about in the same attitudes; and nothing to hear but the same listless talk. I'd almost reached the edge of the camp, when an excited babble of voices just ahead made me look up.

I quickened my pace—anything for a diversion.

About fifty men had gathered about something which I could not see distinctly; it rather seemed as if it might be a horse. As I came up, a man on the edge of the crowd caught sight of me.

"Hey, sonny," he called, "maybe you can help us. We rather think this is Stepan of your Hundred. Make way there," he shouted, "here's somebody who might know."

The crowd opened up for me; and I saw that it *was* a horse. It was standing there trembling and dripping with sweat; its flanks were streaked with dried blood; there was something tied on to its back with rope.

"Take a good look, sonny. Is that Stepan by any chance?"

I took a good look; not because I wanted to, but because my eyes were fixed and staring in horror.

He was naked. He was already decomposing in the heat. One arm hung almost to the ground, for he had slipped during his ride home; there was no hand on that arm and no wrist.

They had tied him with his head towards the horse's head, and his feet dangling over the horse's rump. In the middle of his body, just below his stomach, there was a raw, red hole—black with fat flies now; from the foot that was nearest to me all the toe nails had been pulled away.

"Well," said a voice at my ear, "is it Stepan, or isn't it?"

I nodded my head dumbly. *Stepan*—who could find his way home even over the worst country. . . . You couldn't have found your way home now, even if you had been alive, for they had gouged your eyes out. They had done it while you were alive, too, for your mouth was twisted in agony, and your lower lip was almost bitten through. It was crusted with a dried froth of blood.

Somebody joggled my elbow roughly. "Those Kurds cut a man up pretty thoroughly. Are you sure you recognize him?"

"Yes," I said. My mouth was fixed in an idiotic grin, my eyes were still intent on him—they felt as though they would burst out of my head, but I couldn't turn them away. "Yes, I can tell it by the wart on his nose." I began to laugh, louder and louder; I was still staring at him; it seemed as though the world was quite filled with Stepan.

"Take the kid away," said somebody contemptuously. "He's had enough. A fine Cossack—him!" And I was led away, still laughing.

For almost a year I had been a volunteer in the Cossack Army. I was a girl, just fifteen years old.



## CHAPTER TWO

### THE BEGINNING OF AN ADVENTURE

I SUPPOSE it all began—my whole adventure—with a beautiful girl and a sunflower crop.

One evening, in the last week of July, 1914, when I was fourteen years old, we were sitting at supper in our summer home at Raevskaya, and my father, the colonel, was talking about the good work that was being done in his fields. It was all due to his orderly, he said, a handsome rascal, who had attracted the prettiest girl in the *stanitz*a, and she in turn had been followed by the other girls. This sweetheart of the orderly's was not only the prettiest girl, she was a born leader, the best singer and dancer in the neighbourhood, with more ribbons in her hair than anybody else. (It is a Cossack custom—at least, it is a custom among our Cossacks of the Kuban—for the boys to give the girls they like a yard of ribbon to braid in their hair, and a girl's popularity could be judged by the amount of ribbon she wore.)

My father's story excited me so much that I begged him to let me go into the fields with the workers to see this paragon for myself; and—after a good deal of begging,

## *THE BEGINNING OF AN ADVENTURE* 5

and promising that I would be no trouble but take a hoe and work with the rest—I was told that I might go, if I would get up at three o'clock in the morning.

As I was running off to bed in great excitement, my mother called me back, and said: "Take Vassily along in case you want to come back early. Don't walk alone on the highway. . . ." Those were the last words she has ever spoken to me.

But Vassily, or Basil, when I found him, was very incredulous; he didn't seem to think it at all likely that I would get up at such an early hour, or do any work if I did; and though he agreed to call me, he did so with such a sceptical air that I was determined to show him what stuff I was made of.

In fact, when I reached my bedroom, I decided not to go to sleep at all. I got into my nightgown and lay down on the bed, turning over and over in my mind the thought of that beautiful girl, and wondering whether I could ever be her equal.

But the hours passed very, very slowly. Gradually the house around me settled down into sleep; by ten o'clock it was silent. I felt terribly drowsy but fought it off. Midnight—I could tell by the brief ringing of the church bells: everybody asleep but me! Only three hours more!

And now this memory of the strangest day in all my life begins to take on the shape of a dream—a very clear dream, but very remote and apart, as though Time had nothing to do with it.

First, I caught myself dozing, and got out of bed. The room was almost as bright as day, for the moon was high now; and I went over to the window and leaned out. There is something very odd about a Caucasian moon; it does not suck the colour out of things, as I have seen the moon do in other parts of the world. When I looked out of the window that night I could see every flower bed in its proper blazon. To-day, I remember only two things distinctly—the dark blue and white of iris directly under my window, and, farther off, the flaunting of red and yellow tulips.

As I leaned there, with the scent of lilacs coming heavy across the garden, the nightingales began to sing. I really think they sang to one another, for I never heard two of them at the same time. Nor do I mean to boast when I say that our Caucasian nightingales are the sweetest in the world, for I have heard the same bird sing elsewhere, but never with such a long trill or so sustained a breath, and never so deeply from the heart.

I was not a romantic child, but an adventurous one; yet I stayed there for a long time that night, motionless and enchanted. I think I must have stood so for a good two hours, because the next thing I remember is a line of grey growing in the east and a new chill in the air. I went back to bed, thinking to warm myself for a few minutes, and then get up and dress. . . .

Something was poking me in the side—a long stick. A voice called hoarsely outside the window: "Miss! Miss! You aren't dead, are you? It's past three o'clock, and the

## THE BEGINNING OF AN ADVENTURE 7

boys and girls are at the well already. They'll leave in a moment!" It was Basil.

I leaped out of bed in a panic. After all my preparations, perhaps I would miss them! I threw my clothes on and climbed through the window. I saw my nightgown lying on the floor as I got out, and I remember thinking how angry my nurse would be when she found it like that in the morning. I even hesitated, in half mind to climb back again, when Basil's voice called to me still more insistently.

Then something else happened.

Everybody knows how, in very distant memories, the most illogical things occur, just as they would in a dream; if we are human, we don't try to explain them away. So, as I started to run after Basil, something made me look back—and I stood staring in a kind of terror. My eyes had caught a picture of my mother which stood on the chest of drawers, and I could swear to-day that her lips moved and pronounced my name. The effect was uncanny: there I stood, frozen in my tracks, quite unable to tear myself away; and there was the boy's voice, half-way down the garden, calling: "Hurry! Hurry! They're leaving, I tell you!"

I came to myself with a jerk and fairly flew through the vegetable garden and down to the well. The workers had left. Basil took me by the hand, and we began to run as I had never run before, catching up with them at last on the very outskirts of the *stanitz*a. Perhaps, had I stayed five minutes longer at my bedroom window, I should not be writing this story....

I had never seen so many beautiful girls before, or such clothes—beautiful wide skirts of many colours and snow-white blouses, gorgeously embroidered; flower wreaths on everybody's hair; bright-coloured ribbons braided into everybody's hair. I was surprised to find them so dressed up, for not even on a Sunday had I seen such striking costuming. I was ashamed, too. If I had known they were going to be so fine when they went to work, I would have put on my beautiful Cossack dress—and here I was, among all this parade and gaiety, wearing a blue dotted frock which no one would notice.

The boys walked in groups by themselves, but after a while they broke away, one by one, and went over and selected a girl: soon they were all walking in couples. I realized then that the girls had dressed up for their sweethearts, and felt somewhat comforted—the last thing in the world I wanted was a sweetheart.

Someone called out to the foreman to ask whether they could sing yet, and he answered—not until we had reached the bottom of the hill. So we went down the long slope, an unreal procession in the growing light. At last we came to level ground, and a girl's voice called out: "First voices to the right, second to the left, and the boys stand next to the second voices."

I went and stood at the right side of the crowd. Somebody there was asking "Hanna" to sing *My Cossack Sweetheart Went To The War*.

I caught my breath. Hanna was the girl I had come to see; and as she lifted her head and laughed at their en-

## THE BEGINNING OF AN ADVENTURE 9

treaties, I thought I had never seen so beautiful a face. It made me want to laugh with pleasure just to look at it. But she wouldn't be persuaded; she said it was bad luck to sing such war songs before sunrise, and that she would rather sing—

*"George is coming to me  
Box of sweatmeats bringing me——"*

But the others would not hear of it, and clamoured for the Cossack song, saying that the sun was already up.

I remember her answer exactly: "No, no, no. The sun won't be up until we reach the field; and the sky is so red it means something bad will happen."

But at last they persuaded her. . . .

*"Cry the willows I planted by the brook,  
Cries my heart, for my sweetheart has gone to the war. . . ."*

The others picked up the tune in sad chorus, mourning across the fields to meet the sunrise. Still singing, they came to my father's sunflower field, and began working in rows, like the sunflowers themselves. I stood close by Hanna, feeling very helpless, for I had no hoe, and did not dare to ask for one.

But when Basil found me and gave me a hoe, calling me *barishnia*, I pushed him away, for I did not want the others to recognize me. By now the sun was up. It must have been about three-thirty or a little after, and we had done about half a dozen rows of sunflowers and potatoes.

About five-thirty the foreman called us to breakfast, where it was laid out down by the creek—buckets of boiled potatoes and three barrels of herring, with a great mound of black bread, cut into thick chunks and heaped on the ground.

It lasted only fifteen minutes, for we were all ravenously hungry, and in any case there was no time to waste. We crowded down to the creek's edge to wash, and the girls all gave the boys a corner of their petticoats to wipe their hands on. As for me, I had no petticoat, so Basil offered me the tail of his shirt. Then back to the sunflowers and the hoe.

But when I picked up my hoe it felt terribly heavy; my back was stiff and aching; my hands seemed to have grown blisters all over them. Hanna, who had kept on looking at me, told me at last to go and get a bucket of drinking water from the creek while she hoed my row for me; it was very good of her, for otherwise I would certainly have had to stop working and leave the field in disgrace. But if I had, I should still be in Russia and not here.

Down at the creek Basil was filling buckets, and we carried them up together, time and time again. After a while I went back to work once more.

About eleven-thirty lunch was called—more boiled potatoes, but with fresh fish this time which the foreman, my father's orderly, had caught in the creek. Hanna and the other girls crowded round him to give him a kiss, laughing that it was because he had prepared such a good

## THE BEGINNING OF AN ADVENTURE 11

meal; but I remembered what my father had said. Someone started a dance song, and Hanna got to her feet and began to dance, light and airy like a butterfly, to and fro, to and fro. . . .

And then—the church bells started to ring.

The singing died away, the dancer stopped dead; and I remember how every girl made the same movement with her hand, crossing herself in fright; for church bells rang that way only when there was a fire or some worse calamity.

They were ringing not only in our *stanitz*a but in the neighbouring town as well. You know how bells sound, when it is neither Sunday nor holy day—how heavy they are and how ominous, like something calling for help. We stood there, staring at one another in astonishment and fear; and as we stood we heard the sound of horses galloping on the far side of the hill.

Nearer they came and nearer, breasting the hill. Now there were Cossacks riding over the fields, crying out as they rode.

And what they cried was: "War! War!"

Then bugle notes floated clear and sweet across the countryside, calling the "Assembly" in the *stanitz*a square; and the crowds all left the fields and began running for the *stanitz*a, all of us running to the same place, the boys far ahead.

When we had reached the square it was already filled with men in wide blue and black trousers and coloured shirts, listening to the *ataman*, the elder Cossack. It was



not Raevskaya—this *stanitza*—but a little town just across the fields from it.

As we stood there on the edge of the crowd, it began shouting: "To arms! To arms! For Tsar and country!" The men were getting their horses, buttoning their tight uniforms, adjusting their sabres and rifles. Then they began to move off towards the station. . . .

Of all the races plunged into the great war of 1914, the Cossacks were probably the best prepared and the most easily mobilized. For centuries my people have been noted fighters; a military nation within the great Russian empire; the conquerors of Siberia; guardians of far-flung frontiers; a free people in a land of serfdom. Though not professional soldiers, they were in constant training and ready for any emergency. That is why, within the very sounding of the *stanitza* bells, they were able to collect their horses and equipment and entrain for the front.

As for the children, the work at home, the fields to be planted and harvests to be gathered—these things are all forgotten. Cossacks, both men and women, have been brought up to believe that war is the beginning and the end of their existence, that they were created and live for this one purpose; and the odd thing about this conviction is that no race of people is more home-loving and peaceable. It is only when war is declared that their duty to country, religion, and Tsar becomes something not to be questioned, and the women remember their ancient custom of following the fighting men and encamping as near the army as they can get.

## THE BEGINNING OF AN ADVENTURE 13

It was a three-mile walk to the station. Fatigue and desperation and the choking dust made some of the women clutch at the men on horseback. But the Cossacks pushed them roughly away and struck up their war song:

*"Hey, woman!  
Your husband is a Cossack,  
And die he surely must.  
For country, for religion, for our father Tsar.  
The time has come,  
The time has come.  
Die we must,  
Die we must.  
Hey! Cossacks, away! Away!"*

Freight cars were waiting at the station ready for the men and horses, with officers standing beside them and the engine hissing and snorting in the front. Horses and men were piled into the box cars together—something more characteristic of Russia than anywhere else. The Cossacks were always transported by rail in this way. They loved to be with their marvellously trained horses. One by one, when they had their beasts settled, the men came back to say good-bye to their wives, to boast—as their custom is—of courage and contempt for death. Even lovers, holding their sweethearts in their arms, did not dare show their real feelings, for fear the others would jeer at them.

The tone of the women's voices had changed. They were frantic and angry at the sight of the train which was

to take their husbands to the front. The sound they made was like the snarling of wolves.

An order rang out above the noise. The men began to entrain.

And then a woman with two babies in her arms, and three or four more children tugging at her skirts, pushed her way towards the engine, "Hey! *Babbi* (women)," she screamed. "Stop the train! Stop this black devil from taking our men to their death without us!" With that, she put her babies in front of the engine wheels and, getting her other children together, forced them to lie down on the track. "They dare not run over us," she shouted triumphantly.

I had followed her through the crowd, and was standing near her, my eyes wide open in amazement. She grabbed my hand and shoved me beneath the engine, right under a jet of steam that came scalding from a valve; I began crawling along the cinders between the rails to get away from it.

I remember it now as a sort of nightmare—a nightmare that was not to end yet. Peering out from between the engine wheels, I could see the station-master running towards us, waving his arms wildly. "Come on, all of you!" he was yelling. "I have a car in the rear! You can go part of the way with your men."

What a mad rush to that car! I scrambled out, was knocked down, got to my feet, arrived panting at the rear car just as it began to move, clawed my way in, and fell to the floor exhausted. All around me they were

singing and laughing, and someone struck up the men's song: "To die for our religion, our country, and our Tsar;" and I forgot my scalds and bruises, and joined in at the top of my voice.

And then the car began to slow down.

A wild scream: "They have gone! They have left us!" . . . A mad rush to get out of the car . . . a heavy push from behind. . . .

I got to my feet half stunned, feeling very sick, with unshed tears stinging behind my eyes. At first I could see nothing at all, and was only conscious of a crowd of people pushing me here and there. Then my eyes cleared—and I saw the freight train just rounding a curve in the distance, bearing the men and horses away from us; and a few women running desperately along the track, as if they still hoped to catch up with it. Somebody had detached our car just as we got started.

"It's a trick! The station-master did it!"—that was the woman who had pushed her children under the engine, and who now turned and began running back towards the station, swearing and screaming like a true Cossack. I stumbled along in the crowd; my shoulder and knee were hurting terribly, and only a blind and terrified excitement kept me on my feet at all.

The station-master had closed his doors against us, but he might as well have tried to stop a hurricane. Down they went, splintering like so much matchwood; the windows were smashed in; and the vanguard of the women, howling with rage and triumph, swept round him as he

cowered in a corner. I peered through one of the broken windows. This is all I remember.

The next thing I knew was that I was being carried along the track again. Someone was shouting: "Another train! Another train! Here's our chance!" Somebody else, to this day I do not know who it was, called me by my name. I was fighting desperately to avoid being trampled underfoot.

Another train was coming very slowly towards us. The women began throwing themselves bodily on to the track, calling on it to stop; and, as it came to a grinding halt, an officer swung off the front car, and walked towards us. He listened calmly as the women poured their grievances out to him and then, seeing that they were really desperate, told them that they could get into the third and fourth class cars.

The nightmare was over.

And I remember saying to myself, as I settled down on a bench in the fourth class, that if they detached the cars this time I would give up and go home. But the train moved off and we did not stop.

I fell asleep.

Someone was shaking my sore shoulder and hurting me terribly. My knee ached, my back ached from hoeing, my hands were blistered and smarting. I didn't want to be awakened, I wanted to go on sleeping. I started to cry.

There was a soldier standing before me with a paper and pencil in his hand. "Who are you, little girl?"

I choked back my tears and swallowed hard.

## THE BEGINNING OF AN ADVENTURE 17

"Where is your father?"

"Ahead—ahead in the troop train."

"What is your name?"

I did not know what to tell him and burst into tears again; but he only asked me gently if I wanted to go on until we caught up with my father's train at the border.

This sobered me. "Will they go to war?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Can I go?"

"To the border, yes. What is your name?"

"Maria Kolesnikova," I answered rapidly, giving him the first name that came into my head, a name as common in Russia as Smith or Jones would be in an Anglo-Saxon country. If I had mentioned my father's name, the name of Colonel Yurloff of Raevskaya and Ekaterinodar, they would have sent me home, as they could so easily have traced it.

"Where do you come from?" was the next question.

With my heart in my shoes, I named the *stanitza* near which we had been working that morning; but he seemed satisfied, wrote it down on his paper, and passed on.

Darkness was gathering among the fields through which we travelled. Behind me in the growing night lay Raevskaya and the friendly hills and vineyards of my home; what lay ahead of me I neither knew nor cared, so long as it brought me nearer to the war.

"War," sang the train wheels, "War, War"—a monotonous, contented song.

I curled up happily in my corner and went to sleep.

---

## CHAPTER THREE

### “MARIA KOLESNIKOVA”

I SUPPOSE it must be difficult for anyone to imagine the feelings of a Cossack girl, waking on a train somewhere in the Caucasus on a beautiful summer's morning—a girl of fourteen who found herself being carried through unfamiliar country towards a mysterious “border.”

Does it sound very cold-blooded if I say that I gave my home and parents scarcely a thought? I knew that my father must be on the way somewhere; I could imagine my grandfather demanding one last salute of him before he left. But the thought vanished almost as soon as it had come, for I was already occupied with my own excitement. The women were chattering all around me, asking themselves what our destination could be. As we were travelling south, most of them seemed to think that we were headed for Turkey, and there was much talk of the desolate Armenian wastes that lay ahead of us, the terrible winter cold, the great heat of summer.

I am not exaggerating when I say that I felt no remorse and no fear. I was a Cossack. As with my companions, so with me it was a blind instinct to follow men to war. And

besides that, to me—caught up into all this violence and carried helplessly along—here was an adventure, the sort of adventure I had dreamed about among the summer hills at Raevskaya and in the long, dull winter days at Ekaterinodar. I can remember only one thing that bothered me—the pain in my knee and shoulder, which were still aching badly.

Some soldiers entered the car with tea and bread, and I ate my portion ravenously, staring out at the green fields and hills already hazy with the sun. We were passing through a land of vineyards, a smiling land; and war seemed very remote as the soldiers' choruses were carried back from the front cars and the women answered with Cossack love songs. Shortly after breakfast we drew up at a little station, and—after a good deal of shunting to and fro—our cars were attached to another train, bearing more soldiers to the border.

So it went on, day after day. Sometimes we waited for hours at lonely sidings for another train to carry us on—women of all ages crowded together on the wooden seats of our fourth class cars. Our progress was so slow and so disjointed that I lost count of time. All I knew was that we were going steadily south, for the country was changing into the unlovely "yellow land," the sun-baked land of Southern Caucasus. The details of our journey are all blurred together now. I can just remember days when the very air seemed to quiver with excitement. Little towns where we stopped, and where strange faces—Georgian, Armenian, Turkish—peered in at us. Little boys offering



us grapes in baskets woven out of leaves—enormous white grapes, the size of apricots. Men selling goat's cheese. The white skin and huge brown eyes of women—tall, graceful women in their native costumes with the long narrow skirts and the brocaded aprons and head-dresses. Armenian girls, with necklaces of coins, and coins sewn into the brims of their hats—very young, some of them, and already married.

Days of endless gossip and confusion; of song and laughter. Time and time again when the various lists were made I was Maria Kolesnikova—the little girl in the torn, grimy, blue dotted frock, very small for my age and very slight, the girl whose father was somewhere in the "soldier train" ahead.

And the nights—often sleepless nights, because of the excitement of waiting for what the next day would bring forth. The sudden, scarce, mysterious lights of little wayside stations, swallowed up in a rushing darkness. The great engine rounding some curve ahead, with an angry shower of red sparks. A heavy head, snoring on my shoulder. The gruff voices of tired men outside. . . .

I remember waking one morning just at dawn, and finding that the yellow lands had given way to one of the loveliest valleys I had ever seen. All night long we had been winding round curves and thundering through tunnels; dark hills had crowded in upon the track, and thrown back our echoes at us as we passed; and my sleep

had been troubled and broken. As I looked out at that peaceful valley, I thought for the first time of my final night at Raevskaya, and the nightingales singing in a lilac-scented garden, and Basil's voice calling at the open window.

But I had no regrets, I was so very young, but somehow I was going to find my place, I was going to do things. It was too late to turn back, nor would I have done so if I could. Adventure lay just ahead. And the wide world. And war.

At last we arrived at a station not far from the Turkish border. A corporal came through the car, telling us to get off and we would be taken to a camp, where other women were quartered who had come to be near their husbands. Once more my name was taken, and once more I was "Maria Kolesnikova"; but this time the young corporal stared at me in frank disbelief and I am sure that, if he had not been so busy, I should never have got any farther than that station. But he passed on at last with a shrug of his shoulders; and I jumped off in great relief, and hurried after the others.

We trudged along through the dust and heat to one of the Red Cross camps, a crude settlement where some two hundred wives of soldiers were living, whose husbands had been on border duty before we entered the war. They seemed to have made themselves very comfortable there; the children looked gay and contented; and the nurses, in their grey uniforms and black aprons and head-dresses

with bright red crosses sewn on to them, gave us a cheerful welcome. They even found a dinner for us, a very good dinner of barley soup with bits of meat floating in it, fresh black bread, and tea; and showed us some empty tents where we could sleep for the night.

I remember creeping in among some strange women, and rolling myself into a blanket I had been given. Outside they were singing—war songs and love songs. And then some of the husbands came over from a neighbouring camp; and the last thing I heard before I went to sleep was the slow mutter of conversation, going on and on.

The next day we moved slowly on towards the frontier at Sarakamysh. About midday we reached an army camp, and begged for lunch. They brought us some chunks of hard black bread and a bucket of water, with the air of throwing food to pigs—for they were soldiers from another part of Russia who did not care for Cossacks. Here was their chance, and they took it—taunting the women, and teasing the children until they cried. There was nothing for us to do but to move on.

All that day it was the same story. No camp had received any orders about us, and at every place we came to and asked for a rest, they told us that there was a war on and that their camp was not a picnic ground reserved for Cossack or other women. But at length, towards evening, we came to some ordinary cavalry soldiers who seemed willing to let us stay—for a price. Tired and bedraggled as we were, there were some handsome ones among us.

At the time I did not understand the scene which fol-

lowed, except that it was ugly and terrifying. These strange men picked out the best-looking girls and began to invite them to spend the night in their camp; and the more frightened and speechless the girls became, the more they laughed and insisted. There was one girl in particular—she was almost as beautiful as my Hanna of the sunflower field—whom they seemed very anxious to keep with them, so anxious that two or three of them began to drag her away from us.

She threw a beseeching look over her shoulder; but the women were huddled together, too scared to come to her help. When they had gone a little way off, one of her captors—a short, stout man with a heavy red face—suddenly caught hold of her blouse and ripped it down. There is a little photograph in my mind which nothing will ever fade—of a full-breasted girl, naked to the waist, her mouth opened to scream. Then it all became confused; for the men closed in around her, quarrelling among themselves, so violently that I believe they would have torn their captive in pieces if an officer had not appeared and beaten them off with his *nagaika*—the whip that many officers carried with them. Then he turned around and cursed us, telling us to be off and not disturb his men, or we should feel the *nagaika* on our backs too.

So that night we slept by the roadside under the cold stars, with no blankets. I have never been so miserable in my life.

We were up at sunrise and starting on another painful march. The sun grew hot overhead, the road was unpro-

tected by trees and covered with sharp stones that bit into our feet. It was a stark, bare, inhospitable country, and there seemed to be no end to it. We climbed up one steep hill after another; the little children, who were barefooted, began whimpering and had to be carried; and there was such a bleak, discouraged look on every face that I did not dare ask if we were ever to have breakfast.

But at last to our joy we came across some horsemen—Kuban cossacks—who told us that a camp was just on the other side of the next hill. I hurried ahead with some *babbis* from another part of the Kuban, *babbis* who could not possibly recognize me; and we panted up the hillside, and stood laughing together at the top.

For there was a marvellous sight below us—a broad yellow plain, covered for miles with a Kuban cossack camp. Almost directly beneath us, a *polk* (regiment) was going through its sabre drill, the sunlight flaming along the drawn blades. I drew in a deep breath of pride. It was a fine thing to be a Kuban cossack.

But then I realized that it would be even finer if I were a Kuban cossack with some relatives to turn to. For the women moved off in little groups, some asking for this *polk*, some for that; and every one of them seemed to know where she was going and what she wanted to do. I wandered from one group to another; no one seemed to notice me or to care what happened to me; until, after a little more than an hour, there was nobody left but one woman and myself.

I walked along behind her, trying to fight off my tears.

In a little while she came across a tall Cossack, whom she asked for directions to her husband's *polk*; and as they spoke together I stood there unnoticed, utterly lonely, the big tears pouring down my cheeks. I wanted to turn and run away; then I hoped that the earth would open and swallow me up; but all I did, as the woman moved off in the direction she had asked for, was to break into a loud sob.

The big Cossack noticed me then for the first time.

"Why, *divchina* (little girl), what's the matter?" he asked; he had a kind, smiling face, and his eyes twinkled as he looked down at me, fingering his triangular beard.

I must have looked an odd sight as I stood there, gazing up into his face, with little grimy channels down my cheeks where the tears had fallen. I stammered out that I had had a terrible time trying to find my father, and had only just discovered that he wasn't in the camp at all. Then I dug my knuckles into my eyes and sobbed even louder than before.

The big man patted me on the shoulder. "Cheer up," he said, "I expect I know where your father is. Some of the men have been detained on the road with the sick horses, and some with the provision train. He may come on later."

I didn't exactly share his confidence in my father's showing up later, but I was grateful to him for his kindness, and followed him back to camp. He took me up to some half a dozen men, seated on the ground, resting

after drill. "Take care of this child until I come back," he said curtly, and walked off.

After a little laughter, not unkind, the men were good enough to ignore me. I sat on the ground a little way off from them, staring at my sandals—or what was left of my sandals. Within an hour they had gone off to their afternoon drill. When they came back I was fast asleep.

It was the arrival of the mess bucket which woke me up—very appropriately, for I had not eaten all day. I stared at the men with wide, hungry eyes as they pulled big wooden spoons out of their boots and dug in; and so intent was my gaze that one of them found an extra spoon for me and invited me to sit in with them. I needed no second invitation nor, in the eating contest which followed, did I make such a bad showing for fourteen years. It was a good hot meal—a sort of oily porridge; they followed it up with tea brewed in the same bucket, which they seemed to enjoy immensely. The youngest Cossack there gave me his tin cup full of tea, a lump of sugar, and a piece of black bread. It tasted good, though it wasn't tea, nor was it soup, nor much of anything, and when it was all over I felt a great deal happier and a great deal more like the adventurer I wanted to be.

A little while later my big friend appeared, and everybody began asking him what on earth he intended to do with me. He silenced them with a frown. "This child has no mother and no relatives except her father," he said gruffly. "And her father is somewhere back with the sick

horses. I'm going to keep her with us until I can find him, and look after her. And that goes for all of you.”

I discovered that his name was Kosloff, and that all the men called him *Kosel*, which means “goat” in Russian. I don't know how he got his nickname—from his pointed beard, or goatee; from his family name; or from both. He was evidently in authority, for they asked him no more questions after that, and when he ordered them to build no fire that night but to roll up and go to sleep, they obeyed promptly and without too much grumbling.

“Here's a blanket for you,” he said to me, giving me his own. “Curl up, now, and don't worry.”

I woke very early the next morning, in the half light before sunrise. That was the strangest waking of them all—stranger than in the carriages among the women, or on the hard roadside. There I was on the ground, with a volley of filthy curses ringing in my ears; one of the men had been snoring, and another was trying to quiet him. I sat up in my blanket and stared wildly round me; and the cursing stopped immediately. I could have sworn, even in that dim light, that the man was blushing. He muttered something that might have been an apology, and lay back in his blanket. . . .

After that incident, I couldn't go to sleep again. The feeling that a whole camp full of men was sleeping around me, the uncertainty of what the day would bring forth, kept me wide awake.

A figure loomed up in the half-light. It was Kosel.



Either he had not been to sleep at all, or he had got up very early, for he came in now, yawning and stretching his arms, and making the sign of the cross before his mouth—an old peasant custom, to keep the devil from jumping down one's throat when it is wide open.

Kosel! It was his kindness to a lost child which was responsible for all the events which follow. And it was his kindness which supported me during the next two days, when everything was rough and unfamiliar, when I did my best to hide away from everybody, creeping back only for meals, and sleeping as far from the others as I could. I have never met a man since who was more sensitive than this practically uneducated Cossack, this sergeant in the army of the Caucasus. He was a strict disciplinarian, and often got into heated word battles with his men; and after each one, if I happened to be present—a scared, ragged little girl—he would turn to me and say, in his gentlest voice: "Everything all right, Maria?" It was not long before I worshipped him.

But he could not help looking worried every time he saw me, and that did not make me feel any better. On the third day he told me that I must come with him to division headquarters, and my heart sank into my sandals, for I was quite sure that they would send me home. In spite of all my fears, I had only one ambition now—to stay with Kosel until we reached the war.

"Headquarters" was a large, dirty, ramshackle house, in a state of such confusion that it took Kosel a long time

to find the officer he wanted; nor, when he found him, did he get much satisfaction. He pointed to me, where I stood feeling very small and foolish, and began to talk—but he had scarcely achieved more than three sentences when the officer waved the bundle of papers he was carrying and shouted angrily:

"Get out! We're not running an orphan asylum!"

Kosel saluted, took me by the hand and led me away. Once outside, he stopped, and began tugging at his ear in the greatest perplexity. Ashamed and mortified, I did not dare say a word; but I gripped his big fingers, with a feeling that they were the only things in the world I had left to hold on to. At last he seemed to make up his mind, and strode off with me to another and smaller house, with a long row of carts lined up against its wall.

"Wait outside," he said, "I'll be back in just a few minutes."

I sat down on the shaft of one of the carts, and examined my sandals in dumb misery; the soles were almost through, and my feet felt sore and swollen. At last I could not see them at all, for heavy, unshed tears. I was quite sure that Kosel could do nothing for me, and all the wretchedness and mockery in the world came crowding upon me. I suppose there is nothing as unhappy as an unhappy child. . . .

But there was Kosel, beckoning me in at the door. I dashed the back of my hand across my eyes and followed him inside. It was an army supply house. A giant, fat

man, with a round, bald head and little shining eyes stood there squinting at me in a most unpleasant fashion.

"Here's the child, brother," Kosel began. "You can see it's almost out of its rags. Won't you please oblige me with an outfit?"

The supply *feldfebel*, or sergeant, grinned. "Brother Kosel," he said, "you're a fool and you talk like one. My uniforms are for men, not for children, and *especially* not for girls. But here's what I'll do. I'll give you a pair of pants to put her in. Then you'd better tie up the top, throw her into the river, and your troubles will be over." He grinned again, showing a line of remarkably yellow and broken teeth.

"Now don't joke that way, sergeant," Kosel pleaded. "Listen to your kind heart, and give me an outfit of clothes. I'll do the rest. I swear I won't bother you again."

Growling that these *babbis* couldn't leave a man alone, not even in war time, the sergeant lumbered off into an adjoining room, and came back with a pair of pants, a khaki shirt, a suit of underclothes, a pair of boots, and an army *shapka* (in this case a cap of karakul or astrakhan). He tossed the whole outfit over to Kosel.

"There they are," he said contemptuously. "And much good may they do you. But take my advice while there's still time. Wash your hands of all women."

"Always trust in God, Maria," Kosel remarked when we were outside again. "He will lead you out of any

trouble." And we smiled at each other very happily, and made our way back to camp.

Once there, Kosel summoned a man with a motorcycle and sidecar, handed him my outfit, and gave him explicit instructions. "Jump in, *divchina*," he said to me. "This man will take you to my brother. Then you are coming back here again."

That was my first motorcycle ride, and I can't pretend that I enjoyed it, for the ground was extremely uneven, and my driver—like so many Russians—seemed determined to get the last fraction of speed out of his machine. He was a fatalist, too; the prospect of sudden death did not seem to alarm him. When at last we stopped at a village, I felt as if every bone in my body had been shaken loose.

We had drawn up outside a little hut, and my escort was calling loudly for "Kosloff"—who, when he appeared, looked so exactly like Kosel that my eyes nearly started out of my head. The only difference I could see was that this man's beard was square. He said he was terribly busy, but would do anything for his brother, even to sitting up all night altering a uniform.

He called for a bootmaker, and asked him how he could cut down the boots we had brought in; and the man, after looking me over with tremendous gravity, remarked that the only thing to do was to turn the boots in and make a new pair of soft leather. He also added that he couldn't see what a girl wanted with men's clothes, that it was flying in the face of nature, that there would be a curse on

it, that—but Kosloff, who seemed to have much the same sense of discipline as his brother, cut him short with a curt order to take my measurements. “Come back to-morrow morning,” he said to me. “Your uniform will be ready by then.”

Early next morning we went back, and with shining eyes I watched my driver receive a neat little uniform and two small suits of underwear. Kosel made me go away and put the uniform on immediately. “This is going to make it a lot easier for you until you find your father,” he said when I came back. “And easier for me, too,” he added, half to himself.

I rolled up my pigtails, and put on the *shapka*, an addition which so delighted Kosel that he broke into a sort of jig step, looking for all the world like a great bear. “All right, *synok* (sonny),” he laughed. “Before I die, I’ll make a Cossack out of you.”

And he did.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### PARADE

FOR three days I had been hiding wherever I could, ashamed of being seen in my ragged blue frock and afraid of being sent home by the first officer who came across me. This new uniform made all the difference in the world. No sooner had Kosel approved of it, than I squared my shoulders and marched off—to find the corral.

I loved horses then as now, and no better proof could be given of my misery during the first three days than the fact that I had kept away from them for so long. There were some beautiful ponies among them, friendly little animals, and I was standing talking to them, when Gritsko, the man in charge, sauntered up. He was a great hulk of a man, but seemed good-natured enough.

"I know how to curry and brush horses," I suggested tentatively.

He took one look at me, and burst into a roar of laughter. "That's a good one! Why, you couldn't reach to a horse's back."

"Oh, yes, I can." I'd show him! I went to a rack, and got a curry comb and brushes. He shrugged his great

shoulders, but made no attempt to stop me. "Better just do their legs," he said, and moved off.

After two hours of hard work, I knew I had done a good job. I couldn't help laughing to myself—for the last hour or more Gritsko had been watching me furtively, his expression changing by degrees from surprise to amazement. When he took the horses to the river, he invited me to go with him—which was his way of thanking me; and when I didn't fall off the pony he had put me on, he seemed even more astonished. The Cossack always respects someone who can manage horses, and I heard no more jokes from Gritsko that morning.

But at dinner time, when I went to the field kitchen for porridge, and stood in line to wait my turn, the soldiers had a lot of fun with my uniform. They asked me what corps I belonged to, and when I answered: "The Kosel (Goat) Corps," I thought they would never stop laughing.

When I told Kosel about it afterwards—a little tearfully, for my self-esteem had been badly wounded—he told me that, whenever I was asked such a question in future, I should answer: "The Third Ekaterinodarski Polk," (The Third Ekaterinodar Regiment). Then he promised me a pair of *pogony* (chevrons) for my shoulders, with the name and number of my division on the straps.

With these on my tunic, I began to feel like a member of the great army. I was adapting myself, as children easily do. I did not see very much of the men—I kept out of their way whenever I could; and I did not make any real distinctions of sex between them and me—as yet.

They were merely older and larger people, who lived in a different world, who gave me work to do from time to time, and let me roll up in a blanket not too far from them at night. I knew now where all the important places were; where to find Gritsko and the horses, the watering place at the river, the veterinary, the Red Cross, the field kitchen; where, above all, to find the privacy I needed—a ruined hut, a patch of coarse brush.

There was one more important lesson to learn.

I was taking eight horses to water by myself, one afternoon, riding one and leading the others. The Cossack equipment makes this possible, for the bridle, though it is otherwise like that of other countries, has a long strap attached to it which the Cossacks wind about their waists when they go into battle. They are trained to fight standing up in the saddle, which they manage by swinging the right stirrup across the saddle to the left side and the left across to the right. Then they stand on them, the bridle attached to their waists by the long strap. Many a wounded man has ridden home on his horse, due to this peculiar harness.

Well, I was holding eight of these straps, and had only gone a little way from camp, when an officer stopped me.

"Here, *malyi* (kiddy), can't you see an officer when you go right by one?"

"Yes, sir," I ventured shyly.

"Well, then, idiot, why don't you salute?"

"My hands are holding eight horses, sir."



"Ass! What have eight horses to do with your hands, when you meet an officer? What lot are you with?"

"Third Ekaterinodarski Polk, sir."

"What company?"

"I . . . I am with Kosel, sir."

"You are with what?" He looked at me more closely.

"You look like a girl to me, child."

"I am a girl, sir."

"Oh, you are, are you? Tell this Kosel to report to me."

And he gave me so many long names that I knew it would be impossible to remember them. I told Kosel about the incident, which was worrying me terribly; but it didn't seem to trouble him very much. He said that in the future I was to remember that I belonged to a "Reconnoitring Sotnia or Hundred, of the Third Ekaterinodarski Polk."

But then I began to complain that the officer had asked me to salute him when my hands were full; and Kosel took that a great deal more seriously. "Officers are sometimes unreasonable," he pronounced, "but remember that they are always right. They—are—always—right. And now I'd better teach you how to salute."

The lesson was brief and satisfactory. As for the officer and his threats, they were very soon forgotten.

The horses were soon left entirely to my care, together with odds and ends of camp jobs, such as building fires, and getting hot water for tea. And then one day Kosel

asked me if I would like to accompany the Reconnoitring Hundred when it went to drill.

*Would I!* I was in a heaven of pride as I rode down beside him at the head of our Hundred. For some reason or other, I'd never dared go near the parade ground before; indeed, I had not seen it, even from a distance, since the day of my arrival. It was an amazing sight. Thousands of Cossacks were drilling there, each *polk* in its distinctive uniform, a variation in colour of the well-known Cossack dress. Black or grey fur *shapkas*, red white, or blue *cherkeskas* (tight-bodied top coats) set off with bright-coloured hoods. The brilliant sunlight, the sharp orders, the clear bugle calls, the fantastic maze of colour. . . . I caught my breath sharply, and Kosel turned to me with his whimsical: "Everything all right, Maria?" He knew.

When our Hundred had formed into a circle with Kosel and a bugler in the middle, he beckoned to me to join them, for our officer had not yet appeared. "Let's see what kind of a soldier you are, Maria," he said; and the drill began. I can remember nothing of it, except that it was rather like a game of "Follow-my-Leader." We did just what the others did, as well as we could—I say "we" because my horse knew far more about it than I, and seemed to understand more or less what the orders meant, so that in the end I left things to him.

There was about an hour of this before the officer arrived, and I had to leave. The men greeted him with "Good morning, your nobleness," shouted in unison; and I rode as near as I dared, so as to get a good look at

him—for though I had heard something about him from Kosel and the rest, I'd never seen him before.

He was a very resplendent gentleman—very handsome and entirely chic. His *cherkeska* was black, but his *besmet*—the Cossack uniform coat and breeches,—was dark red, almost maroon, and a red *bashlyk*, or hood, hung down his back in graceful folds. His black karakul *shapka* had a red top, trimmed with gold braid. His sabre, his dagger, the *gazry* (dummy cartridge holder) across his chest—all were mounted in sterling silver, and chased with the same intricate design.

He gave an order and the men drew their sabres. Thereafter he stood idly by—a bored and magnificent spectator—while Kosel shouted the commands. When it was all over, Kosel chattered with him for a moment and then called across to me.

And I knew that my fate was to be decided then and there.

The men had already accepted me as some kind of a mascot—a useful mascot, keeping out of their way except when there was work to be done. But I knew that Kosel had been worried about his commander, and what he would think of me.

I am afraid that my face was pale and my lips trembling as I rode up to them; and that when I had dismounted and saluted, my knees were knocking together in a very undignified manner.

“Don’t be frightened, *divchina*,” said Kosel. “Nobody is going to bite you.” He turned to the officer. “She’s a

good child, your nobleness," he continued earnestly, "and has made herself very useful about the camp."

The officer smiled down at me, as I stood there stiffly at attention. "What is your name, child?"

"Kolesnikova, sir," I answered, after the custom of giving the family name only. I felt very small and frightened, and terribly afraid that I was going to disgrace Kosel by bursting into tears.

"Well, well. Maybe I can help Kosel find your father. We'll see." I took that for a dismissal, saluted, and rode away. Kosel was beaming. Oddly enough Kosel and I never spoke of my father again. Was he really trying to find him?

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE HUT

Two months had passed. Odd jobs and more odd jobs. An occasional drill was still allowed me as something of a treat. Day succeeding day with startling rapidity. I was too young, and this adult world too strange, for me to have any feeling of monotony.

I don't remember thinking about my home; I was generally too busy, or too excited in the day time, and too weary at night. Perhaps this is true of all children who have been more or less left alone to their own devices—that home attachments mean very little to them.

The impressions of childhood are far stronger than the realities; and perhaps, if I went back there now the mountains would not seem half so tall and steep, nor the road so long between our camp and the village. But some things cannot have changed. The woods, where summer drifted imperceptibly into autumn; the October days, crisp and clear; a smell of wood smoke at evening—things like that. I was happy then and healthy, for the air was like wine and I had grown accustomed to hard work.

One morning Kosel appeared, holding something behind his back.

"Got a present for a good girl. You can have it if you can guess what it is."

I think I mentioned about every article of military accoutrement, before it dawned on me.

"A sabre," I said breathlessly.

"Correct!"

That same afternoon he took me along to sabre drill, which I had watched so often that I knew most of the commands already, and so I made very few mistakes. True, my muscles were so stiff the next day that I could hardly get up, but I soon got over that. It was not long before I was drilling with the Hundred every morning.

The only fly in the ointment was this: sabres had to be cleaned after every practice, and I invariably cut myself with anything sharp. If a piece of glass or a pen-knife were a menace to me, what about a large, shining sabre? And how my "brothers" would laugh if I cut myself! There was only one thing to do—hide myself, and clean the thing with the utmost caution.

This is what I was doing one day, when two Cossacks happened to sit down near my hiding place and started a very loud and very childish dispute about the relative merits of their blades.

Said one: "My sabre is the best that ever came out of Turkey. My grandfather had it, and what a famous cutter *he* was. Never missed a head he aimed at!"

The other laughed. "A Turkish sabre?" he said con-

temptuously. "What's famous about them, I'd like to know. Now my blade is something to be proud of—it belonged to a Persian pasha. My great-great grandfather wanted the sabre so much that he freed the unholy devil from his bonds, told him to run, caught him up, and cut his head off. This is a real sabre—and as for yours, why you—you couldn't give a man blood-poisoning with it!"

"Very well," said the first man angrily, "there's always a way to prove it. We'll try the two of them on a stone, and see which sings the sweetest."

Then: "Listen to this," said the owner of the pasha's sabre. "Put this against your thick ear and tell me if it doesn't sing as sweetly as a nightingale." A pause, and the sound of a second blade being struck on stone. "Nightingale!" said the owner of the Turkish blade in hoarse contempt. "Here's mine singing like the angels themselves." Upon which the dispute grew so loud and rough that it seemed certain to end in bloodshed; but they went off at last, still arguing fiercely; and I crept out of my hiding place.

They had given me an idea. What kind of sabre was mine—Persian or Turkish, nightingale or angel? I struck it sharply against the stone, and held it up to my ear to listen to its vibrations. No tone at all. I struck it again. Good heavens, the wretched thing was bending up. I went on striking, but it began to look more like a corkscrew than a sabre; and then at last it dawned on me what the matter was. It was made of tin!

Tin! And I had been so proud of being a real soldier. I

looked furtively round me. If any one of the Hundred had seen this performance, I should die of shame.

I went back to Kosel, half in tears. "Why did you make a fool of me?" I asked him in a choking voice, holding out the twisted remnants of my sabre. He tried to console me. "Why, that was a good blade," he said, "if you didn't have to use it. It is the horse doctor's uniform sabre, and I imagine he thought quite a lot of it. You've certainly ruined it now."

I looked at him ruefully. "Cheer up, Maria," he went on. "I'll get you a real one and then you won't be a tin soldier any longer. You see, I really thought you would hurt yourself, but, of course, now that you've learned to handle a sabre, I'll have to find you a proper one . . . just as soon as somebody gets killed."

He turned up the next day with another ornamental sabre.

"You must be content with this," he said, rather grimly for him, "until we get into action." This was the first time he had ever talked of fighting, and the first time that my childish mind had made any connection between drills and battle. I was half thrilled and half afraid.

Towards the end of October the army was split into two sections—one to remain on the border, ready for action, the other to move farther back to the rear and billet near the villages.

My Hundred stayed in the rear, varying its daily routine now with the building of huts—for the days had become grey and chilly, and winter was not far off. There is



one very odd thing about the Russian peasant; he lives in a wide country with enormous forests to draw upon for lumber, yet it seems absolutely necessary for him to coop himself up in a tiny hut which he will share with such domestic animals as wander in.

Our soldiers ran true to form in the building of their quarters—little rude huts, with ten men assigned to each. And they could easily have made them five times as large, with a whole army on hand to build them.

And now a new problem arose. It was one thing to sleep near my "brothers," wrapped in a blanket under the open sky; it was quite another to share these cramped quarters with them.

My first night will serve as an example for the rest. It had been raining all day, but we had gone through our drills just the same, and had come back to Kosel's hut, and hung our uniform coats up to dry.

Supper was over. The windows were tightly shut. The air was foul with the fumes of *mahorka*—a crude peasant tobacco—and the stench of unwashed bodies. I lay curled up in my bunk, watching the men with an entirely new feeling: modesty. That is what four walls can do to you.

The oil lamps were lit, and a stove was burning. Kosel had found a pack of cards, so greased and dirty that the figures on them were barely visible, and the men were playing for matches instead of money. You don't have anything to spare out of a few shillings a month; but the disputes were just as loud and the play just as intense as if a million roubles hung in the balance.

After that they took to singing songs and telling stories. They were very good to me, those men; for though—since Kosel and the commander had made no objections to me—they had come to take me for granted, they were very careful to whisper any story that wasn't fit for me to hear. The two noisiest there were the huge Gritsko and Fedka, a red-haired good-for-nothing about half his size, and all they argued about was the amount of liquor each could swallow without feeling it.

But this is the scene that I remember still with a sort of horror. My nine companions had decided at last to hunt for insects, and there they all were, crouched around the stove, which was burning fiercely in the centre of the hut. First they took off their blouses and singed the seams, then they pulled off their shirts. . . .

The lamplight threw grotesque, great shadows on the walls, and gleamed on their white skins and hairy chests. I'd never seen a half-naked man before and lay in my bunk, staring at them with horrified fascination. Their conversation was brief and monotonous; they were so intent on their task that they had forgotten all about me. Outside a dog howled miserably, and a thin, drizzling rain pattered on the roof.

The stove threw a red glow on Kosel's matted chest.

Nothing makes you so lonely as shame. I was suddenly conscious, as I lay there, of the predicament I was in; of my girl's body—for the first time in my life, I think; of the strangeness of my surroundings—that I, a colonel's daughter, should be here, in this place that smelled so

horribly of bad air and bad tobacco, of singeing shirts, of damp foot wrappings hanging up to dry, of unwashed bodies and feet.

Somebody—it was the great Gritsko, I think—rose slowly to his feet, muttering to himself, stretching his arms. He was quite naked.

I pushed my fist into my mouth and bit on it until it bled. Then I crawled from my bunk and stumbled to the door—out into the night, into the rain and mud.

When I came back at last, chilled and miserable, they had all gone to sleep. There was still a glow from the stove, and I thought I could safely take my own clothes off now to dry them, and to hunt for insects as the men had done. But my shirt was only half off my head when somebody snored loudly and twisted over in his sleep, and I scrambled into my shirt again, and went and curled up, shivering, in my bunk.

When at last I fell asleep, I had a dream of Kosel.

He had the body of a goat, four legs, and a great shaggy coat of fur.

A naked Gritsko was driving him round and round the hut. . . .

## CHAPTER SIX

### PATROL

EACH evening for the next two weeks was a repetition of the first; I thought I would never get used to it, and I was entirely thankful when an order came for us to move to the frontier. But there are no easy solutions in army life. I discovered that I had merely jumped from the frying pan into the fire, for if a soldiers' hut can be trying to the nerves of a young girl, it is nothing when compared to a dug-out.

Darkness, damp earth; *maborka*; unwashed bodies. These are what the word "dug-out" conjures up for me now. For the first few days there I thought I was going to be physically sick until I began to tell myself that I had no reason to complain about the stench which an army gives off in the field—I hadn't had a bath myself. And then, with the forming of this childish philosophy, some repulsion disappeared, and with that my shame; I was beginning to be a soldier.

Kosel, I think, had known my feelings from the very beginning; and he had been wise enough to say absolutely nothing. None of these men had any intention of offend-

ing me; and what they did casually . . . I had to learn that there was no harm in that.

A child grows used to things very easily, and within a month I had become quite used to the sight of them, in all the intimacies of a dug-out. But—with some instinct that went deeper than mere modesty—I kept my own self jealously hidden from them; I never took off my clothes in front of them; I used to wander miles to find places where no one could see me—something which nobody, not even Kosel, ever realized.

There was no drilling nor practising now. For the most part we did our sleeping by day, and went out on scout duty at night; so that I had a good deal of time to myself, for I was not allowed to go along with the men. But one night, as they were preparing to leave, Kosel said to me:

“Do you want to come with us to-night, Maria?”

I jumped to my feet, flushing with pride.

“It won’t be dangerous,” he added.

That spoiled everything. “Shame on you, Kosel,” I said angrily. “Do you take me for a coward? Now you’ve made me a soldier, you’ve got to treat me like one.”

The red-haired Fedka snickered at this, and Kosel turned angrily on him and told him to be quiet. Then: “I’m sorry, Maria,” he said to me, in a most apologetic voice, “but, after all, you’re only a *babba*, and a ride of this sort is always spooky the first time.”

With that, he gave me a *boorka*, a huge woollen cape which covers man and horse, and is so tightly woven that

it is practically rain-proof. The *boorka* is worn only by Caucasians.

It was about ten o'clock when we left. For a while we rode along our lines, then formed into single file, and headed for the river. Somewhere beyond the river, I knew, lay the "frontier," and on the frontier the Turks and the Germans. . . .

"Dead silence! Pass the word down." The words were hissed back at me by the man in front. We had reached the river bank.

Even the horses seemed to have caught the contagion of the silence. They put their feet cautiously into the water and waded almost noiselessly across. I was sure I could hear my heart thumping. We came up on to the other bank, and suddenly it began to rain violently. Water poured off my hat, and the sound of heavy rain-drops on an earth I could not see made a little thunder in my ears. I did not hear any order, but my horse stopped of its own accord; and, peering through the darkness, I could make out an indistinct mass just ahead of me. The men in front had halted.

Someone on foot brushed past me. It was Kosel. Three others came behind him. They disappeared silently into the darkness.

We seemed to have waited there an age before they returned. There was a low, guttural order that I did not understand; but we turned left-handed and began to ride up-hill. After two hundred yards we stopped, and Kosel with his three companions disappeared once more.

The rain had ceased, and there was nothing to be heard now but the gurgle of water sucking into muddy ground. An occasional sound as some horse moved a little ahead of me. A cough hastily suppressed. The silence seemed as though it would never end, and my excitement grew with it into something approaching terror. Was Kosel lost? Had he been captured by Turks? And suppose it came to fighting, out here in the night, and me with nothing but a tin sabre to defend myself with. Kosel had promised me a revolver, but so far had not given me one; and I began to blame him for bringing me unprotected into all this danger. There was a stirring ahead of me and, with eyes more accustomed to the night, I could make out four men dismounting and creeping away. Good saints, what did this mean—were they all going to get lost? Would it be my turn next? I laid a trembling hand on my sabre, and thought of going out into that darkness, stumbling through the mud all alone.

And then a voice, quite close to me, muttering something. . . . The reins slipped from my fingers, and I was just about to scream, when I heard it again. It was Kosel's. He had crept back unheard, and now he was ordering the men to go back to their horses. They mounted and we rode off again.

I'd lost all sense of direction, and left things entirely to my horse, who seemed to know instinctively when to stop and start, and how to avoid the little patches of tough brush that grew close to the ground. Then we halted again—somewhere near the river, as I judged, for I could

hear the sound of running water. The four men in front of me dismounted, and motioned me to hold their horses; I turned and was about to talk to the man behind me, but he was listening so intently that I kept silent. Then he slid off his horse, gave the bridle strap to me, and moved off towards the river.

I was quite alone.

I asked myself why they had done this to me, why they couldn't have let me go along. The sound of the river made it difficult to hear anything, but I could see for quite a little distance all around me now. I peered fearfully this way and that. Horrid stories came crowding into my mind—all the rumours I had overheard in the camp, about Turks and what they did to their captives.

There were Cossacks somewhere behind me, but I did not know how far away, for I could neither hear nor see them; a Turk could creep up and slit my throat without their knowing anything about it. A damp little breath of wind, coming up from nowhere, touched my cheek and made me start almost out of my saddle. And then, on the left side of me, a black shape, low on the ground, I could swear it moved; it was creeping slowly towards me—very, very slowly. I sat there frozen in my saddle; my hands were full of bridle straps; I was helpless. But as I watched it, in the fascination of terror, the wind came back again, and the shape wavered ever so little. . . .

Just enough for me to see that it was a patch of brush.

I don't know how long that wait continued, nor how many different shapes the darkness produced for my ter-



ror. I was trembling all over, and my fear communicated itself to the horses, for they began to paw the ground restlessly and jerk at their bridles—something they had not done before, so well were they trained.

Then shadowy forms loomed up out of the night—their approach had been covered by the sound of river water, and they were almost upon me before I saw them. I screamed this time, but my terror was so great that the scream came out of my throat like a sort of choking cough.

And this time it was the patrol coming back. Our work that night had been done.

Once across the river, we made our way to camp at a light gallop. My throat was dry. I was unable to stop trembling. Back in the dug-out, the lamps were lighted and the air was soon foul with the smell of *mahorka*. Fortunately, *mahorka* smoke is so heavy that it makes a darkness of its own—I say “fortunately,” because when Kosel got back from making his report, he came over to me and said: “Well, Maria, what do you think of patrol duty?” But he could not see my face clearly when I answered:

“It’s not bad. But it does seem rather dull.”

It must have been about two o’clock that morning when I awoke with a heavy hand tugging at my shoulder. “Kosel says you can go on duty if you want to.”

I was out of bed in an instant.

“What sort of duty is it?”

The man pointed silently to the top step of the dug-out.

So I was to be a sentry! That meant that they really considered me as one of them, or they wouldn't have trusted me with so much responsibility. After the sleep I had had, the terrors I had known only a few hours before seemed very unreal, and I was quite delighted at the thought of this new duty.

Kosel came down the steps with a rifle which he gave to me. "Better put on your *boorka*," he said, "it looks like rain again. All you have to do is keep your eyes open and not fall asleep. If you get drowsy, just prop your chin on your rifle. In two hours a man will relieve you."

I climbed up the steps.

After a little while it began to dawn on me that there was far more discomfort than honour in doing sentinel duty. The rain had begun to fall, and there I was, standing out in it, while the men slept peacefully inside. Kosel was making a soldier out of me with a vengeance.

Time began to drag. I tried to see if the other sentries were sitting down or standing up, but it was too dark to make them out. My eyelids felt heavy; it would be a terrible disgrace to go to sleep on duty; so I propped my chin on the rifle barrel. Then I thought better of it. What if the rifle should go off? It was growing deadly cold, and I shifted from one foot to another, trying to get some feeling into them. I thought that Kosel had really played a very dirty trick on me, making me go through all this.

An officer came by and said something in a low voice. I couldn't understand a word of it, but he passed on quickly

without waiting for an answer and spoke to the next man. I noticed that he did not reply either. . . . It must be all right.

The next hour seemed as though it would never end. I bit my tongue and my finger nails until they hurt, I leaned my chin fearfully on the rifle barrel; but the drowsiness became steadily worse and worse and the cold more and more penetrating. Patrol duty at least had the excitement of terror; this was merely blank and hideous. Just when I thought I couldn't hold on another second somebody came up the steps behind me. Praise the saints—the relief!

I stumbled down into the dug-out and fell heavily asleep.

I awoke in the morning to loud conversation and laughter. Kosel was bending over me with a tin cup of steaming tea and a loaf of warm black bread. It was delicious. While I was eating and drinking, he congratulated me on being such a good soldier. This seemed the right moment for asking him about arms. "Aren't you ever going to give me a sabre and pistol, Kosel?"

"Just as soon as I can," he promised. "Another *polk* will be taking our place here. We'll be going back in a very few days now. Then I'll see what I can do."

Back to the drills and the daily care of horses—badly neglected during our stay at the front; back to the little hut, which seemed like a paradise after a dug-out.

All this time I had not had a bath, and now I was horri-

fied to discover a row of insects in the seam of my trousers. I found an empty hut, built a fire there, took off my clothes, and began singeing. But my underwear was so nauseating that I threw it into the fire. Within a few days my second suit was just as badly infested and I was forced to go and explain the situation to Kosel.

So the next morning he took me along with him to a small white hut on the outskirts of the village, chattered to a soldier on duty there whom he seemed to know, went in, and reappeared a moment later with a very pretty Red Cross nurse. She said she could arrange a bath for me, if Kosel would build a fire for the water; which he did with as much enthusiasm as if the bath were to be his.

The nurse helped me with my bath—it looked like a mud pool before I got out of it—rubbed disinfectant all over my body and head to keep the insects away, and went off in search of new underwear. When she came back with it, it was ridiculously big—especially the underdrawers, which seemed to be about twice my height. We looked at each other and began to laugh hopelessly.

“Perhaps the sergeant can do something,” she said at last, and went out to find Kosel. When she came back, she measured the drawers from my waist down, and bustled off again.

“He’s done something to them with his sabre,” she said, when she came back. “He’s really a very clever man. Now hurry and put them on, and I’ll get you some hot chocolate.”

The thought of chocolate was very tempting, after the

army slops I had been having; but getting those underclothes on in a hurry was more easily said than done. Kosel had done the best he could, but you can't make a pair of the largest underpants in the Russian army fit a girl of fourteen, however hard you try. The seat came down below my knees, and only a few inches of the legs remained, so that my legs were bare from the thigh down, and there was an enormous amount of material to spare around my waist. The undershirt wasn't much better, either. It made a large, unsightly bulge along my back; and when I finished dressing it looked as though I'd stuffed one pillow down my trousers and another pillow down my back.

The nurse and Kosel were kind enough to say nothing when I rejoined them; nor, when Kosel told her that I was his niece, did she ask me any awkward questions. She merely told me to come back for another bath whenever I could.

Kosel made me have my hair shorn after this; and I doubt that anybody who did not know the truth would have taken me for anything but a boy.

"Come over here, Maria, I want you to meet a friend of mine who has brought you a horse."

It was a few days later, and Kosel was standing outside the hut, talking to an Asiat, a swarthy creature with a villainous scar running all down one side of his face. I really think Kosel had more friends than any other man in the army.

The horse was a beauty. All it needed was a grooming, and it needed that badly.

"Where did you . . .?" I began, but broke off hurriedly. I remembered that one does not ask an Asiat where he finds a horse. So I thanked him nicely, and turned to Kosel.

"All I need now is a sabre," I said.

And—to our astonishment—the Asiat took off his sabre and offered it to me. Kosel asked him what he would do without one, and the Asiat laughed, squinting his eyes in a rather horrible manner.

"I won't be long without one!"

So now I had a horse and a sabre. As soon as I possibly could I tried the latter against a stone, and held it anxiously to my ear to test the vibration.

It sang like a whole choir of angels!

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### FORAGE

THE bare plateau land of Armenia grew sharp with November frosts; and, like a hunger which the cold whets, our discontent was sharpened with it. We wanted war: and here, between huts and dug-outs, we moved from one useless existence to the other, slowly retreating from an enemy whom we never saw and whom it was in our very bones to hate. Soldiers, transferred from the Western Front, brought us tales of great battles and glorious deeds back there; many of them were wearing the army's highest reward for valour, the Cross of St. George. No wonder our Cossacks were down-hearted—why were they, the bravest of the brave, condemned to this life of idleness and inactivity?

Our food supplies were running low, and the Armenians who lived in the surrounding towns and villages suffered for it. Their lands were stripped, their sheep driven off for our benefit; and those who tried to hide their flocks in the mountains met with little mercy when they were caught. Moreover the army, sullen and depressed, was only too glad to find somebody on whom

to work off its feelings, and the Armenians suffered worse things at our hands than partial starvation.

I did not know a great deal of what was going on for, as I have explained, the men were careful not to let me overhear their more lurid stories. But a child of fourteen, gifted with sharp ears, cannot help but learn things in the army, and there is one conversation which I remember very distinctly to this day.

It took place in our hut. Kosel happened to be out, and Fedka and Gritsko had just staggered in from one of their periodical drunks. I was quite used to seeing them in this condition, and they knew better, when Kosel was about, than to get too violent or to say things which might harm a child; besides which, they had an instinctive and surprising decency.

But to-night the damp cold and the general discontent abroad in camp seemed to have been too much for them. They were cursing loudly when they came in, and the men grew tired of trying to keep them quiet, and let them have their say. It was mostly about Armenians, whom most Cossacks despise as a very unwarlike people. Fedka and Gritsko seemed to have found quite a few new things about them. I lay in my bunk with the blanket over my head; I really didn't want to hear. I, too, naturally despised Armenians then, but Fedka and Gritsko were getting a little bit too foul, even though I didn't understand a tenth of what they said. Indeed, I'd almost dropped off to sleep, when a particularly loud burst of laughter woke me, and I sat up wide-eyed in my bunk.



They had quite forgotten all about me.

"Wait a moment," Fedka was saying, "that isn't all. This fellow said that there was a hut at the very end of the village, which they visited last of all. And what do you think they found there?" He hiccuped. "Believe it or not, six women—two of them were pretty old, he said, but at least two were young. What's that?"

Somebody said that it wasn't very odd to find six women in a hut.

"You don't know the half of it," Fedka answered. "These weren't six ordinary women, brother. . . ."

Somebody poked him in the ribs. "The kid, Fedka," he whispered hoarsely. Everybody turned and looked at me, and I hurriedly scrambled under my blanket again: I couldn't tell then why I felt so miserable or why, though the story hadn't made much sense to me, my cheeks burned and burned.

My own experience of foraging followed soon after.

I elected myself a member of a party, of about a dozen men, bound for some border village. Kosel was not around, but since Gritsko and a man called Stepan from our hut were both there, I didn't see that I could be doing any harm, and no one seemed to care whether I came along or not.

We set out at about nine in the evening, covered with our *boorkas*, for there was a dismal rain storm beating down from the mountains.

We had taken a road that ran left-handed along the

front, and passed camp after camp as we neared the border. These were our only landmarks, for the night was pitchy black, and I could scarcely see the man even a few feet ahead of me. But when the camps had all been passed, and there was not even an occasional light to keep us on the right path, I began to realize that nobody had thought of taking our bearings.

We seemed to be travelling on the side of a hill, and I kept sliding to the right. Did that mean anything? Did it mean that the range was east or west of the line? It was rather a helpless feeling, slipping about on a wet hillside, and I began to wish that the black heavens would open and disclose their constellations so that we could tell our way by them. The chill rain pattered on my *boorka* like a song, changing its tune with the wind. My *shapka* shed water on my neck and back. I was content to let my horse do all the guiding. . . .

We had come to a halt, and one of the men was speaking. "When we started out, we faced the frontier. Then we turned left, this way. So the front must be on our right."

"Maybe it is and maybe it isn't," grumbled a thick, stupid voice. "Hey, did we turn anywhere?"

"I was going straight," said the first man. "Where do you think we are?"

"You answer, bright one." That was Gritsko. "You brought the matter up."

If only Kosel were along! I was convinced that he would never have lost his way like this. Well, next time

I would know better. The men had dismounted now and were talking in low tones. In the middle of their discussion one of them let out a shout of dismay. "Fool, fool. Look what you've done to the horses. You've mixed them all up, and how in God's name are we to know which way they were headed? Now we are properly lost!"

"My horse hasn't moved since we stopped," I volunteered. At which they mounted with a good deal of grumbling, and lined up beside me, but they didn't seem to have a single idea amongst them of what to do next. I began to think that all men, with the exception of Kosel, were remarkably stupid; here we were, lost among the foothills, very possibly in enemy country, and nobody could think of anything to do. Apparently they hadn't bothered to find out where the village lay which they were supposed to be visiting; they had just taken the most likely road out of camp, and the cold hills had swallowed them up. And me with them.

There is something uncanny about all hills—particularly on the Caucasian border, where murder walks at night. We were at anybody's mercy, and it seemed to me just a question of who would get us first—the Turks or the brigands, for I had no doubt at all that the darkness was swarming with one or the other.

It was decided at last—with none too much conviction—that *if* the front was on our right, and *if* we had not changed course, then it would be better to travel left until daybreak, when we could determine our position by the sun or some landmark.

So we turned sharp left . . . and ran into immediate trouble. We seemed to have chosen, of all things, the side of a steep mountain. Our horses slipped and slithered in the mud, and a thick, soaking brush made it even more difficult for them to keep their foothold as they climbed; the rain was in our faces now, and got in under the *boorkas*; my clothes and saddle were dripping wet; my hands so numb that I could scarcely hold the bridle; my eyes ached.

My companions were cursing one another, their mothers, their God. I hoped God would not get angry and send lightning as punishment—I was terribly afraid of lightning. I could imagine it flaming down through the darkness. . . .

“The summit! Here’s the summit!”

It was a voice, hoarse with triumph, about a hundred feet above my head.

“Can you see anything?”

“Fool, I did not become an owl, riding in the darkness. Get together, here!”

“There won’t be any army roosting up here, that’s certain. Not with all these ravines. We may be thankful to God that He saw us to safety, praise His kindness.”

“Kindness!” someone exclaimed angrily. “What kindness are you talking of? Look at our wet clothes!”

Nor did we seem much better off, for all that we had reached the top of the range. The weather was wilder up there, and a mournful wind howled across the night, blowing great sheets of freezing rain into our faces. We

wandered around for a while, trusting to our horses not to lead us into some ravine—growing colder and more miserable every minute. Then at last someone found a barn.

We broke in. The place was deserted. It was well built and full of hay, so—since it was attached to no house and there didn't appear to be another house for miles around—there was nothing for us but to stay there until day-break. The only question was—who should stand on guard duty? Not I, for one; I could hardly keep my feet for weariness; nor any one else, it seemed, for when Stepan growled: "There's no one within gun shot here—let's go to sleep"—nobody had any objection.

We tethered our horses in one corner, and went to sleep on the hay.

The barn door opened. A great Turk stood there, swinging a curved, naked sabre. He looked slowly round the barn, then came across to where I lay, too terrified to move or to scream. His feet made a scratching noise on the barn floor—couldn't the others hear him? He stood over me, grinning from ear to ear; bent his head closer to mine, and closer; drew his sabre very softly across my cheek. . . .

I woke up with a start. My horse had broken away from his corner, and was gently nuzzling my face as he ate the hay. The darkness was softer, and I could make out the form of a man lying next to me. Day must be breaking outside.

I got up, found Gritsko, and shook him by the shoulder.

"Daybreak," I said.

Later that morning one of our Cossacks came into the barn, dragging an Armenian with him—an ancient, terrified creature, who implored us dumbly out of a pair of bright black eyes set in a face so wrinkled that it looked for all the world like a dried apple.

The Cossack threw him to the floor, where he lay crying and mumbling some sort of pitiful gibberish. I could hardly keep my tears back. The brutes! treating an old man like that. But they were swearing so terribly that I didn't dare interfere.

Then Stepan, who could speak a little Armenian, drew his sabre and leapt forward. I caught my breath. Holy God, was he going to kill him?

He stood over the old creature, shaking his blade in the air; seized him by his matted white hair; and began to speak very rapidly, evidently threatening to take that aged head off, unless . . .

The old man clambered to his feet, sobbing, and stumbled out of the barn, with all the Cossacks after him. I stayed behind. I was afraid they were going to do something terrible to him, and I didn't want to see it done.

After a while, some of the men came back, roaring with laughter. You dogs, I thought, you blood-thirsty dogs, laughing at the murder of a harmless old man who couldn't possibly have anything to do with war. I wanted

to say it out loud, but I was afraid of what they might do to me—they looked so wild and strange, standing there, laughing their heads off.

Then the rest came in—all but Stepan. Was Stepan the murderer? "We have enough sheep to feed the whole army," one of them said triumphantly. "But I wouldn't trust him to lead us. The old bastard might be treacherous."

So perhaps they hadn't . . .

"That will be all right," said another, "we'll just send a man ahead according to his directions, and make sure before we drive the sheep down."

So they hadn't killed him, after all.

He was outside, a sobbing old bundle of rags, guarded by the contemptuous Stepan. A little way off was a flock of at least a thousand sheep, patiently nibbling at the spare, wet grass.

It would have been fun, driving the sheep down; but the old man was made to walk on foot until he was obviously too weary to go any farther. I couldn't bear it. I suggested that we should give him a lift. Somebody laughed harshly.

"A *babba* is a *babba* and very soft-hearted. That's a *babba* for you!"

A *babba* indeed! I couldn't have been more grossly insulted. Wasn't I a soldier? The dirty devils!

"Yes, I'm a *babba* and I'm soft-hearted," I answered haughtily. "But I'm not a stupid fool like you. You lost your way last night, and you wouldn't be able to find it

now, except for this old man. He's leading you like little children. Why, your heads are as thick as mules' hides—you can't even see that our only way of getting back by the shortest route is to have the old man lead us and he's so tired now that he won't be fit to lead us much farther."

Strangely enough, they agreed with me at once; Cossacks can be very mild when one of their own women scolds them; and when I tried to lift him up on my saddle, one of the young Cossacks immediately spared me the trouble.

At noon we entered the camp amidst great rejoicing. All that week we ate mutton. It came to us prepared in every conceivable manner, but it was most popular as *shashlyk*—mutton broiled over charcoal—the national Caucasian dish. I became somewhat better known because I had been a member of that foraging party.

Every time a new dish appeared, I kept wondering what had happened to the old man. At first I did not dare inquire, for fear of being ridiculed as a soft-hearted *babba*. But at last I couldn't stand it any more. I tackled Gritsko.

"What happened to the old man?" I asked.

"What old man?"

"The Armenian who led us down from the hills."

"Oh, he . . ."

Gritsko looked very stupid, very red, very uncomfortable.

"He's happy now." And that was all he would say. I did not ask to go foraging again.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### THE DEATH OF KOSEL

MID-WINTER found us far back among the hills, slowly retreating eastward towards Erivan and the River Araks; moving among chill, damp pasture-lands and treeless slopes; passing through a land whose inhabitants, like animals, crept underground at our approach—for the Armenian villages are dug into the very hillside.

And at last, beside the muddy waters of the Araks, the Turks caught up with us.

One day when I was reconnoitring among the foothills with Kosel and some of the Hundred, we came near enough to the Turks to hear their voices; near enough to catch a glimpse of a broad plain and over it, for what seems miles and miles in my remembrance, a great black sea of men. A wide river lay between us and them—but what a strange fear comes upon soldiers when they see their enemies for the first time! My comrades stood frozen beside their horses, watching Kosel for orders.

Often on our rides we used to encounter great nests of poisonous snakes, when Kosel—without further ado—would cry “Shoot and cut”; and the men would get to

work with a curious ferocity, laughing and yelling with glee; and would boast afterwards of the number of reptiles they had beheaded just when they were about to strike.

Now they were silent—not only afraid, I think, but awed in the presence of an army which had for so long been nothing more than a rumour to them. Even the horses did not move unnecessarily.

We were not in any danger, unless some Turkish outposts had crossed the river; but I remember looking round on my comrades, and telling myself that I would be sorry if they had to die, that I forgave them for any offence they might have committed against me. I felt sure that we should be in the thick of battle at almost any minute, and I was filled with remorse for my own misdoings. But then Kosel gave the order “south-west”; we walked our horses until we were well below the skyline; and rode home without a single Turk being any the wiser. Oddly enough, in spite of my intense relief, I felt vaguely cheated.

Kosel went immediately to the *sotnik*. I was near enough to overhear his report that we were heavily outnumbered, and the *sotnik's* weary rejoinder: “They need most of us on the Western Front, worse luck. That’s why we have to retreat.”

After this I noticed that all the officers looked worried as they went about their duties, and that the general who came over to us from Erivan looked worried too. All that day there were conferences at headquarters, and Kosel,

who attended them with our *sotnik*, said that we had no means of slowing down the enemy, and that they could walk right through us into Russia unless the high command at St. Petersburg took some notice of our situation. He added that we had very little ammunition now, although there was an overabundance not more than two months ago—and even hinted that this was all part of those intrigues which had been rumoured about among us.

I had never known him to be so outspoken or so dispirited.

When I went on guard duty at headquarters very early the next morning, officers were still poring over their maps. It was obvious that they had been at it all night. After an hour or so one of them came out and told me that when the new guard arrived I was to give the man in charge instructions to report inside. That would be Kosel.

I could scarcely wait to tell him; I had a feeling something tremendous was going to happen—a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach, half excitement and half fear.

When Kosel appeared with the new guard, his behaviour bore me out. He went into the conference room and reappeared in about ten minutes, pulling hard at his right ear, so hard that it looked red and swollen—as was his habit when something really worried him. He sent one of our men to fetch an officer who had charge of a group of sappers.

After a short conversation, this officer, in his turn, summoned a section of his men; these were followed by more

of our Cossacks; and almost immediately after them a sapper sergeant hurried up with another group of engineers.

We were called sharply to attention. . . .

Our *sotnik* came out, accompanied by his relative, the general. In the flaring torchlight, for it was still dark, they both looked very weary and dishevelled—and very grim. The general began to speak to us. “My brothers——”

*Brothers!*—officers invariably addressed their soldiers as “men.”

“My brothers, we have no means of holding back the enemy. We cannot go into action because we have neither sufficient men nor sufficient ammunition.

“But if we cannot hold them back, they will soon reach the main line of the railroad, and go far into the heart of our mother Russia. Russia is asking a sacrifice of you. Who will volunteer for a dangerous expedition, an expedition that will probably cost you your lives? Who will volunteer to die for our mother Russia and our father Tsar?”

And he went on to explain what had to be done. There was a big bridge across the river Araks, flanked by two smaller wooden ones; the first must be blown up, the other two burned. Only in this way could we hope to stay the enemy's advance. As he spoke, appealing to what lay deepest in us, there were tears in his eyes, and tears in the eyes of most of his listeners.

I watched the men anxiously; I had fully expected every one of them to step forward on the spot. But no one

stirred. I don't think it was a question of bravery, for they were all soldiers born and bred, men who felt death in battle to be the only glory they could hope to achieve. . . .

My legs were moving of their own accord. Before I knew it, or wished it, I was standing before the general, my hand at the salute.

"I will go, your high nobleness."

Apparently the general was just as surprised as I was.

"You? Why, you're only a child."

"I'm a Cossack!"

The next moment Kosel was at my side. "Maria, child, you don't know what you're doing—fighting is for men." I said nothing, but stood at attention, my eyes on the general. Behind us I could hear other men moving from the ranks.

Kosel counted thirteen volunteers. "Shall I take twelve, your high nobleness? That should be enough." He was pulling at his ear again.

The general smiled. "Take the twelve, and also this"—he saluted me, half ironically—"Cossack."

I felt Kosel's disapproval. I felt the eyes of the other men boring into my back, I felt their unspoken thoughts: "Huh! A *babba*! Somebody to look after instead of getting our work done." In that moment I could have died of humiliation, but it was too late to back out now.

We had to start immediately, so that the darkness could still cover our movements; but the air was already chill with morning as we moved from town towards the Araks,

past thousands of sleeping men, beyond the last picket, out into the empty flatlands. The bridges were between one thousand and two thousand yards away; beyond them, under the dying stars, the mountains rose dark and silent. Along their flanks the whole Turkish army was encamped.

"Lie down, everyone!"—that was the sapper sergeant, in a hoarse whisper: he had been one of the first to volunteer, and now he assumed the command as a matter of course. Flat on the damp earth, I began to think of my grandfather, who had fought at Port Arthur; had he ever trembled like this before action? Would anyone tell him about me if I died—and tell him that I died bravely?

The sergeant was ordering one of his men and two of ours to creep to the nearest wooden bridge and kindle a fire there with petrol; then three others to burn the other bridge. Kosel, who had been holding my hand, suddenly gripped it tightly; ~~we~~ were to blow up the big bridge!

As each man crawled away the sergeant called him "brother" and shook his hand: at last he turned to Kosel. "I am going now," he whispered. "After you have counted ten slowly, follow me." I closed my eyes and began to count, ten, twenty, thirty; no movement from Kosel. Then a firm hand on my shoulder: "*Synok*, you follow right after me. And don't let me out of your sight. Be sure to keep your head down close to the ground. If you hear any shooting, lie flat and wait till it's all over. And, Maria . . . you're a little fool, but you're a good Cossack."

My heart was pounding wildly; I was terribly, hopelessly afraid. I would have given anything to crawl back then and there without waiting for any gunfire. My knees felt soft and weak; I had to clench my teeth to keep them from chattering. But there was Kosel—I couldn't imagine anything really going wrong with him at my side.

Above us the sky was slowly turning grey.

Kosel crept forward, very smoothly, using a peculiar wriggling motion, and I did my best to imitate him.

A stuttering from across the river; sharp whistling noises over our head. I started to get to my feet to see what it was all about, when Kosel grabbed my leg.

"Keep down. Those are machine guns. They must have got us located." He crawled faster, so that I began to fall behind. Bullets were whirring over our heads; just like the great wasps at Raevskaya, they sounded. "It's rifle fire now. They must be close," Kosel muttered. Forward again and faster. I was so tired and my knees were so torn that I was ready to jump to my feet and run in order to catch up.

Suddenly we were almost on top of the sergeant.

His mouth opened soundlessly, and he motioned us to stay where we were, then crawled to the man in front of him. The whining air seemed to be alive with bullets. It was growing very light.

"Down, two," shouted the sergeant in front, in a great bellow. "Crawl over to the bridge, one. Give the kid the fuse, Kosel, and come here."

Then I realized that Kosel had been shielding me with his body, for when he moved aside I saw for the first time what we had to face; directly in front lay the great concrete bridge, and beyond it was a wall of men, moving down the mountain side, firing as they came on. Kosel did not hand me the fuse as instructed, but told me to lie still. Then he gave me a smile of extraordinary sweetness, and crawled away towards the sergeant.

A sudden sheet of flame on my right, as one wooden bridge caught fire—our men were working rapidly. Almost immediately another flame to the left, as the petrol caught and the second bridge began to burn.

I flattened myself on the ground, digging my fingers into the grass, my nails filled with soft earth; I felt this to be my last contact with safety. . . . A bullet dug a furrow into the ground not an inch from my head. It seemed as if everyone had disappeared and left me alone to die. A roar of voices on the farther bank, voices that might have come from another world, told me that the enemy was bearing down on the huge concrete bridge, now their only means of crossing the river.

I forced myself to look up. Not fifteen paces ahead Kosel and the sergeant were waiting for the signal that the charge had been laid. It was only a matter of seconds—one—two—three. Kosel caught the signal and half rose to his feet to touch off the fuse. It was a desperate thing to do, and in that very moment I saw the *shapka* torn from his head. There was a sound I shall never forget and could not describe even if I would. Kosel plunged for-



ward, blood spouting like a fountain from his forehead, blood on the grass.

I got to my feet and stumbled forward.

"Kosell!" He half rolled over and lay still, his beard red and dripping. My cries were lost in a terrific explosion; a sensation of intense heat travelled all over my body; there was a blow on my leg as if somebody had struck it with a hammer. The bright sky wheeled above me; the damp earth rose to meet it. I pitched forward on my face, close to Kosel.

I tried to crawl nearer to him, and found that I had no strength to move. My fingers crept out towards his hand, clawing feebly into the earth, trying to reach his hand and grasp it.

"Kosell! Kosell!" I sobbed. The blood was oozing from his forehead, his eyes stared wide and lifeless into mine. "Kosell"—my voice was a distant thunder in my own ears. "Kosell!"

Then the unanswering darkness.

## CHAPTER NINE

### AMPUTATION

THUD! Thud! Thud!

My head lived all by itself. It was the size of the world. Somewhere beneath it was pain—not attached to it at all, but floating around beneath it as chaos floats beneath the world.

My head was quite blind. It did not seem to have any thoughts, unless those violent orange lights which amazed it could be called thoughts. It thudded monotonously, without once breaking its rhythm, like a world that has just taken shape in the void, and has no light and no inhabitants.

Then by degrees the void began to press against it, as though it had grown too large and must be kept in control. On each side of it, and behind it, there was something hard and unyielding—pressing more and more insistently; while the pain beneath had taken shape and was creeping upwards, stabbing like a spear. My head grew smaller and smaller, shrinking so fast that it began to whirl with the speed of its shrinking. It grew dizzy. It opened its eyes.

I was lying in a Red Cross cot, staring into the sky, which was so blue that it hurt my eyes intolerably.

This, so far as I can remember, is what happened to me; I can only remember so much because it was the first time I had ever been badly hurt, the first time I had ever wakened from any other unconsciousness than sleep. As the sky dipped and righted itself before my eyes, a word began to shape itself with infinite slowness—a difficult word, so important that it could only be born with difficulty.

Kosel.

That meant something very dreadful: I made a tremendous effort to grasp its meaning; but a wave of sickness flooded over me, darkening out the sky, and my thoughts drowned in it.

My leg is hurting, and these boards under me are too hard to bear. If only I had a pillow for my head. I must call to somebody for a pillow. . . .

How many minutes passed before I began thinking again? Perhaps it was not even a minute, perhaps it was only a second or two; for there, tremendous and painful, was the same word struggling upwards into my memory.

Kosel.

And then it all came back. He was dead, his goat's beard covered with blood, his big head perforated with bullets, his eyes wide-open and empty.

He was dead, dead, dead. Everything that meant gentleness and understanding was gone. I was alone with my aching body, and I cursed it for being here when it should have died at the bridge with him.

But death is not glorious. Death is the greatest blunder that a soldier can make. Kosel was too splendid a soldier to make such a blunder. Kosel—Kosel could not die.

I tried to get up, for my one thought was to find him; he must be here among the wounded, somewhere near me; some miracle must have saved him from death. With the first movement my leg stabbed right through me like a spear and settled down into a dull aching pain. And then I knew that there was no hope, I knew finally that he was quite dead, and that I should never even see his body.

Never again, Kosel; never again to see you; never again.

I struggled, groaning, up to one elbow. I stared wildly round me; there was nothing to see but cart after cart of wounded, in all the conceivable postures of resignation or agony. I think it was then I first realized that there was quite a good deal to be heard around me. Before, these groans and curses had been a part of my thoughts, not to be separated from the incredible loss I had just come to realize.

We had all been carried back from the front and left here without attention, all these hundreds of us. The air stank of blood.

Through the carts, arranged in a semblance of ranks, a single figure wandered peering into each one. I seemed to recognize him. . . .

A man in the cart next to me coughed thickly, and a stream of bright crimson blood crept, after its first spouting, slowly down the side of the cart. I stared at it without surprise or horror; nothing in the world mattered. Then I was violently sick.

I began to cry.

The world was full of torn and broken men, and male voices cursing, and crying out for water; and no woman there at all, not even a nurse. I began to cry for my own nurse, who used to bind up my little scratches and cuts at Raevskaya, and who sat up all night with me once when I had a fever; for my mother's hands, the coolest hands in the world; for any gentle voice. . . .

"*Synok!*"

There was a man standing over me.

"I've been looking for you everywhere."—It was Kurny, Kosel's friend, who had scarcely condescended to exchange three words with me before. There had been some unspoken jealousy between us—but he was looking down at me now, very sadly, very kindly. "You are the only one left of the thirteen."

I pointed to the wounded all around us.

"Who are these?" I asked, dully; I could not bear to ask him about Kosel.

"We attacked after the bridge had gone up," he explained. "They were such an easy target, standing up on

the hillside. We shot hundreds of them. The artillery caught a lot of them on the other side, too. Of course they hit some of us—these poor devils here. But they're all broken up, and have disappeared into the mountains." He fumbled in his pocket. "*Synok*, will you post this at the nearest town?"

It was a letter to Kosel's family.

There were tears in his eyes. We looked at each other with understanding, because this big man had been the dearest friend to both of us, and now he was dead, and we could not be jealous any more. Kurny did not try to hide his tears from me.

"Am I going away?" was all I could find to say.

"You've got a bullet in the leg, Maria, and you're going to the hospital to get fixed up. I am to take . . . Kosel's place." He swallowed something in his throat. "I'll be glad to have you come back when you're all well. The *sotnik* says the same thing."

Very laboriously, he wrote out the name of the company, regiment, and division, on the back of an envelope, and handed it to me.

"Good-bye, Maria," he said. He reached out for my hand, shook it clumsily, and hurried away.

My cart did not move until the next morning. Somebody had bandaged my leg roughly during the afternoon, and the rest of the wounded had been made as easy as possible. I don't remember much of that—I must have gone into a kind of delirium not long after Kurny left me,

and have a confused recollection of Kosel standing beside me, his eyes staring, blood in his beard; and again of his lying there beside the bridge; and once—the old dream—with four legs and a shaggy body; and once he was hand in hand with me, walking over a green mountain. In the intervals of consciousness I wept for him. I knew then, and it is still true, that I had lost my best friend in the world. There will be nobody again like Kosel.

They put two sick men in beside me—men who should have been sent back long before this. One of them had come by his sickness in the mountains, during the past winter; his hands and feet were frost-bitten. He seemed indifferent to everything. The other had some frightful illness or other. He was incredibly thin—it was impossible he should be alive at all. He was quite yellow, except for the blue of his lips, and each breath he took was so painful that I thought he was going to die any minute. I was too near him to escape from his convulsions; when his hand would claw at my arm, and a horrible froth from his lips sometimes spattered my face.

I used to pray that he would die, but he never did. I was furious that they should give me such companions—men who had not been wounded in the same engagement as myself, or even in any engagement, and who were too repulsive for pity, and too far gone for conversation.

Our hospital train was a long procession of carts, jolting unmercifully over the rough tracks which served for roads: the railroads were already blocked with troop trains and ammunition trains. To keep the rain off, they

**СВИДѢТЕЛЬСТВО О БОЛѢЗНИ № 5994**

Байбатовича - Шафрура Каванди  
 Аббасовича - Шафрура Каванди  
 Марии Максимовны Шафрура  
 этого числа была освидетельствована в состоянии здоровья доктором врачом при Владивостокском кр. вр. госпиталь Марии Шафрура  
 19 лет от роду, на службе с 1918, в настоящее время находится в г. Б. Байбатовича  
 на излечении в семь госпиталь с 1918

При освидідельствованні его въ комиссіи врачей признанъ совершенно здоровымъ.

[illegible]

По изложенной болтовне и на основании Эфс росп. болтнев, предлож. кь прик. по и в 1908 г. № 541, подлежащего усмотрению в отпуске на два сапога; носить оружие — кь го, ссадовав прик.

не жалея и отдавая в распоряжение

OFFICIAL INVALID LEAVE OF ABSENCE  
GRANTED TO MARINA YURLOVA





put an awning over us; it used to fall down every so often, and I would struggle frantically to get its folds off my face.—I could not bear to be covered up with my two dreadful companions.

There were ten days of this. We were given nothing but hot tea and bread. My leg hurt me abominably. Round my neck they'd hung a tag, bearing my name and a description of my wound; it was in the left calf.

That didn't sound very serious, but every time the *sanitar* came to dress it I could not summon up the courage to look. As the days passed I became more and more afraid. I have forgotten most of that journey but the fear; the jolting; the yellow dying man; the *sanitar's* clumsy hands and clumsier jokes; the pain.

Shusha at last—the first town on the way to Baku. My two companions were taken away to hospital, but a doctor asked me if I could hang on until we reached Baku. There was a train for us, he said. I could wait. I felt sure that there were more serious cases than mine, and the thought of a train after that cart was very delightful.

It was early morning when we pulled in at Baku. A battalion of nurses in trim, starched uniforms met us at the station; and we were put on to wheeled stretchers and trundled off to hospital. There they undressed us, and a young doctor opened our bandages to see how badly we were wounded. When he took the bandages off my leg I was determined that this time I would not be a coward. I screwed up my courage and looked at the wound.

My whole leg was swollen to three times its normal size, and had turned quite black.

The young doctor stared at it and whistled.

"The operating room at once," he said.

Why? Why not treat it right here? Two *sanitars* lifted me and laid me on a stretcher; and as I lay there I heard the young doctor say: "Too bad, but it means amputation for her."

"Her!" said the nurse who was with him.

"Yes. It's a girl. Gangrene all over that leg. Have to amputate at once if we are to save her life."

*Amputate?* What did that mean? Then my heart turned over and dropped like a sick thing into the pit of my stomach. Did he mean they would have to cut my leg off? If I could have, I would have run from that hospital at once. My leg off!—never to ride again, never to go back to the army, never to run; never, should I get home again, to climb the hills; never to dance, never to play. I told myself fiercely that I'd rather die with both feet than live with one.

Two *sanitars* picked me up and carried me through a long corridor, and up some stairs; towards the end of the stairs the smell of anæsthetic, which pervaded the whole hospital, flooded down at me, sweet and sickly. The horror was only a few paces away. What could I do?—except not to faint, or lose my senses. Somehow or other I must not let my left leg go, for all the doctors in the world.

A large white room. Just inside the door a great glass

cabinet filled with instruments; my eye caught a row of murderous, long, shining knives as I was carried past. They set me down by the wall, and I sat up and stared around me.

On a stretcher beside me lay a man in a tattered, filthy uniform—of the Western Front by the looks of it. What was *he* doing here? Blood oozed from a bandage around his abdomen, and he was moaning piteously. On the other side a man sat with his bandaged head in his hands, rocking to and fro. “Oh God!” he said over and over again. “Oh God! Oh God!” Once he turned a bloodshot eye on me but there was no understanding in it.

There were several tables in the middle of the room, with men lying on them, and, at the one nearest me, a doctor operating. Silently, deftly—slash, slash; pausing to swab in a wound; throwing the swab away, his rubber gloves gleaming with blood. I tried not to look, but my eyes turned back there against my will. The soldier was lying perfectly still, his mouth open, snoring—in spite of the raw, bloody wound where his arm should have been. A bucket, a plain tin bucket, stood beside the operating table, and there lay the arm, with the hand just coming over the edge. . . .

My eyes went black. Don’t lose your senses; don’t look again; don’t lose your senses; the odour of anæsthetic, sweet and deadly, drifted in and out of my thoughts, I knew that I could not escape from this place, from the knife, from the raw stump they were going to make of my leg as they’d made one of that man’s arm.

A wounded man limped past me; then stopped and came back to my stretcher. "Steady, *synok*. What's happened to you? Leg, eh?" He bent down, and a grimy hand hovered near my bandages. "No!" I whispered fiercely. "No! Don't touch me!" He straightened up and limped off. . . .

They wheeled the armless man past me, a silent figure under the blankets, a grey face, an open mouth, still snoring. . . .

At last the young doctor came in, followed by three nurses.

He looked round him; then:

"Take that girl first," he said, "it's the easiest case."

"Kosell!" I said half out loud. "Kosell!" He wouldn't have let them cut off my leg! A nurse said something to the *sanitars* and they lifted me off and carried me to the operating table. The two other nurses were already there—one with a bowl of water, in which the young doctor was washing his hands; the other with a case of instruments.

The head nurse took my head between her hands, and held it straight on the table. But they couldn't do this—they *couldn't*! I jerked myself free.

"What are you going to do with my leg, Doctor?" I was sitting up. My throat was so dry that I could hardly speak. "There's a man over there with a terrible wound in his stomach and he is suffering more than I. Please take him first."

The doctor was drying his hands. "It's all right," he

replied without looking at me, "I'm going to go after your leg first before it moves above the knee."

"Before what moves?"

"Gangrene." He gave his towel to the nurse, and took my hot hand in his cool one. "It is blood poisoning, my child, and it will cost you your life if we do not stop it at once"—he touched my leg just below the knee.

"How will you stop it. You mean . . . you mean you'll *cut* it off?"

He nodded. "We must, if we are going to save your life."

One of the nurses had laid the instruments out on a little side table; at the sight of them, and particularly of a small, wicked-looking, gleaming saw, the last little bit of hope ebbed away.

## CHAPTER TEN

### A COLONEL AND A DOCTOR

"You can't do it, Doctor," I pleaded desperately. "You mustn't. I don't care for my life. I'd rather die than live with one leg."

"Keep quiet"—the nurse's voice was harsh. She tried to force me back on the table. "Keep quiet, you stupid child. The doctor knows what is best for you. You mustn't waste his time this way."

I began to struggle with her there on the operating table. "Doctor," I panted, "I'm a volunteer in the army. I'm a volunteer—do you understand? You cannot do this without my consent."

He had been standing beside us, quite cool and detached; now his face flushed with anger, and he put both hands on my shoulders and pushed me roughly back on the table. "Now, then, don't interfere with my work. There are plenty of others waiting who are far worse off than you. Don't be a coward. If others can take it, you can."

The nurse was holding my head so hard that I thought her fingers would burst into my temples; an assistant

nurse pushed a cone over my face, and a sweet, heavy, hot smell filled my nostrils and something that was not air burned in my throat. . . .

For a moment I was quiet; the nurse, thinking perhaps that I had come to my senses, slightly relaxed her grip on my head. With an effort born of desperation I wrenched myself free. I sat up, I began screaming.

"The doctor's crazy!"

I glared wildly around the room. The other wounded men were gazing at us, some with fear in their eyes as though this scene had given them a foretaste of what they themselves must suffer, but not a few with sympathy for me, because the poor man and the peasant instinctively distrust doctors.

"The doctor's crazy! He wants to cut off my leg, when it's all right! Why, I can even walk on it! I am Marina Yurlova and you shall not touch me!"

I did not realize how absurd those last words sounded.

A kindly looking, elderly man on crutches hobbled over. "I am Colonel Babych. What seems to be the trouble here?"

I clutched his arm. "Don't let them cut my leg off, your nobleness," I begged. "I can walk, if they'll let me go. It doesn't pain me at all."

He took my hand very gently from his arm and held it. "They shan't take your leg off, child. Be quiet now." He turned to the doctor. "I heard this little girl say that she was a volunteer; and of course she must be—otherwise she wouldn't be here." He was very courteous. "Don't



you think she'd better see the head doctor? Just in case . . ." The young doctor bowed stiffly, and motioned to one of the nurses, who hurried off.

I began to sob. The Colonel put his arm around my shoulders. "There, there," he murmured, "there, there." He looked at the head nurse, who had begun to smile in spite of herself. "I have a daughter of my own at home," he said, "not much older than this little soldier."

A nice old doctor came across to us. "What's this I hear—a child crying?" he said. He had snow-white hair, cut very close, and twinkling blue eyes. He bent and examined my leg, while the young doctor made his report.

The Colonel waited anxiously. "Are you sure you can't save it?" he asked.

"Sure?" said the old doctor, straightening himself up. "No, Colonel, I'm not sure that I can't save it. I'm sure I *can* save it. There's no gangrene here as yet. But we'll just cut it open to make certain."

"You will not cut my leg open!" I screamed. "It doesn't hurt. It *doesn't*! I can walk! Let me go! Let me go!"

The old doctor laughed and pressed my head to his chest. "We aren't going to cut it off, child. We're just going to cut it open a bit to see what little Cossacks have inside their legs. Don't you fear, we will only do what I say."

I did not trust him. He was nice—but he was a doctor like the other one. I looked up at the Colonel.

"Your nobleness, please let me stand up and I will let them cut my leg open. But I don't want to be put to sleep. There is no pain and I am sure that I can stand it."

"Why not try that first?" demanded the Colonel. So I stood on my right foot and put the other one on a chair, with the Colonel supporting me on one side and a nurse on the other. The young doctor put a tourniquet round my thigh above the knee, and both of them went to work.

No pain as yet. . . .

"There's the bullet." That was the old doctor. "There, in the bone."

He sent a nurse off for some more instruments and begged me to lie down, saying that he was going to remove the bullet and that it would be painful.

"No," I shook my head. "Go ahead and take it out. His nobleness is holding me securely."

"All right," said the Colonel curtly, "proceed." His mouth was a little twisted, as though he were suffering far more than I. I looked away. There was a sharp grinding pain. "That's out," said the old doctor. "Hold on, *malyi*. Now the iodine, nurse."

The Colonel shifted uneasily. There was a frightful, burning sensation, so intense that I almost fainted. I dug my fingers into the arms of those who were holding me. "All finished," said the doctor. He lifted me back on to the table, and pressed my cheeks with his hands, for I had bitten my lower lip and my mouth was full of blood. When he saw that it was only my lip, he smiled. "Go

ahead and bandage her, nurse," he said. "Good-bye, little one." He patted my cheek and hurried away.

The Colonel followed me out into the corridor; he seemed to have forgotten that he was a Colonel and I a private soldier, and a very irregular one at that. "You're a lucky girl," he said, walking beside my stretcher, and talking to me as though I were one of his own children. "That old duffer is Doctor—— He's one of the most eminent surgeons in Russia. They tell me he used to charge anything he liked before this war."

But before I went to sleep, back in my own ward, all I could think of was to utter the army's choicest curses against that young doctor who had tried to take my leg off.

Later in the evening, a nurse woke me up, saying that she was going to give me a bath; and *sanitars* came in with a stretcher and carried me off to the bathroom. I had not been there very long before another nurse came in, the one whose arm I had held while they were taking the bullet out. "I'll take this patient, if you like," she said.

When we were alone, she showed me four black and blue marks where I had gripped her; and laughed. "You're very strong, Marina Yurlova. But never mind. If you hadn't put up such a fight, they'd certainly have taken your leg off in all this mad rush."

*Marina Yurlova!*

"That isn't my name, nurse," I stammered. I felt the

hot blush growing in my cheeks as I said it. "My name's Maria Kolesnikova."

She looked at me very oddly for a moment.

"All right. I ought to find out the truth about you, but I won't."

And while I bathed, she took down my history word for word as I gave it to her—that I had no mother, that my father was in the Caucasian border guard, that when he went to war I followed him. I referred her to Kurny, saying that after I got over my wound I planned to go back. When it was all over she shook her head. She was quite young and very pretty; she had curious, dreamy eyes. "I don't believe a word of this," she said slowly, "but I do believe you when you say you want to go back, and I think I envy you. I won't stop you."

She held out her hand.

The next day both doctors came to visit me. I spoke pleasantly to the old doctor but I could not bear to look at the young one, although he tried to be nice to me. I'd learned hate right there in the hospital. I hated that young doctor.

The news that a girl had been wounded in battle and was in the hospital spread through Baku, and it was not long before a number of women came in to see me—probably out of curiosity. They plied me with questions until I felt like a caged animal whom people poke with umbrellas and walking sticks. But I didn't show my resentment, quite frankly because I liked the good things they brought with them, and thought a basket of fruit or a box

of candy worth twenty minutes of inane questions. They were never satisfied; they asked me anything that came into their heads, and seemed secretly rather pleased when I showed embarrassment. Not a few of them suspected that I was a "bad girl," and were disappointed when they discovered that, however closely they probed into my army life, they couldn't find any evidences of lost virtue there.

One of them actually wanted to adopt me. She seemed to think that she was doing me a great favour, and when I told her that I already had a father, she answered that she would write to him, and that he would probably be very glad to have someone to look after me. All I can remember of her is a large purple feather and a preposterous hat. I thought she was a very vulgar woman and disliked her intensely, and made no attempt not to show it, but she didn't seem to notice.

I could walk on crutches and my leg no longer pained me, so I thought it was high time to go back to my regiment, and went to find the old doctor. "I want to go back to the front, Doctor," I said.

He seemed surprised and just a little shocked.

"Haven't you had enough of that, child?" he answered. "Well, we'll see, we'll see."

I didn't feel inclined to tell him that anything would be preferable to adoption in Baku; and he was so vague and so unsatisfactory that I sought out Colonel Babych, and told him the whole story.

He seemed to understand perfectly.

"If you want to go back you shall, just as soon as you're strong enough. I'll see to it myself."

Day after day dragged by; I was beginning to walk without very much difficulty and even without my crutches. The Colonel kept on assuring me that he had not forgotten his promise; nor had he. For, one afternoon, they told me I could get ready to return—a marvellous afternoon, because the purple feather had come in to see me not an hour before and promised me, with indomitable cheerfulness, that it would not be long before I joined her family.

Off I went with my hospital discharge papers to the Commander's military attaché, who told me he would give me a ticket the day my train left for the front; meanwhile I was to report to the barracks. But the young doctor, whom I had hitherto avoided on all possible occasions, cornered me on my return and told me that I might stay on in hospital until my departure. I scarcely thanked him—how I detested that man! Now, of course, I realize he was just a nice young professional doctor who had made an error of judgment.

If ever he reads this, he will know that I apologize to him.

Each morning I reported to the barracks for roll call.

The third time was cleaning day and the *uriadnik* (top sergeant) called after me just as I was leaving: "Hey, you, we need all hands here to-day. You may be living in the hospital, but you're under my orders, and don't you

forget it. Fetch a can of paraffin and get after the corners of those cots." So I spent the morning hunting bed-bugs.

It was a sickening job; and I would rather be killing Turks, I told myself; and it seemed ridiculous to me that soldiers should be turned into a lot of chambermaids. When lunch came—or rather was thrown at us as we sat at a row of long tables out of doors—I could not eat a morsel of it. In the light of that morning's slaughter everything smelled of the job, everything nauseated me beyond words.

After lunch it was even worse, for the sergeant sent us off to clean the latrines. If the others had seemed to mind this kind of work, I should have asked the sergeant for something else to do. As it was, I didn't dare. So there I was with a scrubbing brush—which I thought would be easier, as I would not have to walk too much on my wounded leg—getting all the worst of a very bad bargain. The soldiers who swilled the place out with water seemed to think it amusing to splash anything and everything all over me; by four o'clock I had had more than I could stand.

But that was my farewell to the barracks at Baku.

Back at the hospital, I begged my nurse for a bath and some clean clothing, and she said that the young doctor had ordered a new uniform for me—which, I told myself, was just repayment for a day's filthy work. As for the young doctor, all I hoped was that I would be able to escape thanking him.

But I couldn't—not quite.

The next morning I was told to report immediately to headquarters for my ticket. I bade a hurried farewell to all my friends in hospital.

I remember how, when I found Colonel Babych and told him I was off to the front, he produced a gaudy red silk handkerchief and began to blow his nose with unnecessary violence. "Good-bye, little girl," he said at last. "Don't get into more trouble than you can help. And don't forget Colonel Babych."

And before I could salute him, he saluted me.

In the crowds milling round the troop train I caught sight of the young doctor, searching anxiously for somebody. I managed to keep out of his way until just before the train started; orders to entrain had been shouted, and I was on the point of scrambling into my box car, when he found me.

"Child, you did not even say good-bye to me. Please stop hating me, for I meant no harm to you; in fact, I could be your best friend. Here is my name and address. If ever you grow tired of the army, let me know, and I will take care of you."

He pressed into my hand—my very unwilling hand—an army envelope and a single white rosebud.

And, before I knew what he was going to do, he bent down and kissed me on the forehead.

I was so angry that I would certainly have slapped him if an officer had not passed by at that very moment, or if the train had not begun to move directly afterwards. As it was, I looked at him with such scorn that the poor man's



face went dead white, then flushed a painful red; and he took two steps backward, just as though he'd really been struck. I scrambled into my box car.

The train was almost out of the station before I realized that I was still clutching something in my hand—an envelope and a rosebud. I crushed them between my palms in great disgust and hurled them out of the car.

A lot of tragic things have happened to me, and a lot of pathetic things; but all I have to think of, if I want to cry, is a crumpled white rosebud lying beside the railroad track.

And, doctor, I apologize for that, too.

Midsummer, 1915; a troop train crawling through the hot Caucasian days, the fragrant Caucasian nights. Any wayside station was the signal for a prolonged stop, any railroad intersection meant from two to three days delay. For the first few days we were so delighted with our freedom that we sang Cossack songs from morning to night-fall, and drank wine, which we bought at our various stopping places with whatever money we had saved; but the wine and our voices gave out about the same time, and we shrank visibly into nothing more than a train full of men, sweating and nursing old wounds.

Red Cross trains passed us, travelling back to Baku—a sign, if nothing more, of action along the front—and somebody explained that it was these that were holding us up so intolerably long. As day succeeded day, it

seemed that we should be crawling for the rest of our lives from one halt to the next, prisoners in a box car. They never allowed us to leave the train—not even when we pulled up at the very edge of a cool river, and stayed there for hours.

That journey and the subsequent march from the rail-head are things I've tried to forget—they were so empty of everything but discomfort and boredom. The long marches on foot, which left us spent and listless at night; the silence, except for a monotonous crunching of feet on gritty roads; the hot, shimmering, unfriendly landscape; the occasional meagre oasis of shady hillside or drab river bank; the sun, shooting violent red and green bullets through one's closed eyelids; the nagging of a wound, not quite healed, and constantly needing attention: these things have no importance except the importance of being forgotten.

Our destination at last. . . .

My own division—the lines of our Hundred—my *sotnik*, standing idly in the sunlight. . . . I almost ran to him, when I remembered that I was only a soldier, and slowed up. He seemed delighted to see me, and called out for Kurny.

"Here is our hero returned," he said.

Kurny *saluted* me!

"I'm proud to have you back, Maria," he said, "and you should be proud to come back, for you are the first soldier Cavalier of St. George among us."

"What do you mean?" I looked from Kurny to the *sotnik*.

The *sotnik* explained. "The General recommended you for the Cross of St. George, *synok*; he has the Cross with him, and when he's filled out a few papers it will be yours. See if you can get it this evening, Kurny." He seemed to think that he had made himself perfectly clear.

But somehow the rest of our Hundred did not seem at all glad to see me. They were inclined to be sarcastic, as though I had done something they did not approve of; but they were very vague, and I was far too tired to get to the bottom of their disapproval.

Kurny did not show up again until supper time. He brought a silver cross with him and handed it to me. "The army's highest reward for valour, Maria," he said. I looked at him owlishly. "It's yours," he went on, "and I am to tell you that you may sew a *ratnik's* stripe on your shoulder straps." There was a dead silence, not only from me, but from the rest. Kurny swung round on them.

"What's eating you all?" he demanded angrily.

"*She* didn't blow up the bridge," one man grumbled. There was a mutter of assent.

"Shut up, you," barked Kurny. "She didn't blow up the bridge, but she was the first one to volunteer, and the only one left of them all."

But I was inclined to agree with the rest. I felt that I had done nothing to deserve such an honour. And I still feel that way about it.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### SCHEHEREZADE

I FOUND that our army was still slowly retreating; sometimes we would stay for days on end in the same place ; and never once did we know where we were going or why. There were a few minor engagements—little better than skirmishes—to enliven this somewhat lethargic progress of ours. That summer of 1915 was an inglorious one. Most of our casualties, and there were many of them, were due to sickness; most of our deaths were due to Kurds.

About three weeks after Stepan was killed (I have already told of that) our regiment was moved up towards the top of a small mountain range, and my Hundred had been sent off to a little plateau; like a last outpost of the Russian Empire, we gazed down upon mile after mile of enemy territory. It was a land of the silent; nothing but a row of lifeless brown hills, falling gradually away towards an empty horizon. Nothing stirred; not a distant flock of sheep, not a mountain goat, not even a bird in the breathless sky.

Nothing but one thing. . . . Below us a river wound

through the gash of a shallow cleave; and the cool, discreet noise of water running over stones mocked us where we lay about, crouched in the scarce shade of a few sun-baked rocks. We could not make use of that river; Kurny told us that he had been warned about it in advance—it was known to be carefully guarded. As soon as the sun went down, he said, ten of us could go there for water; until then we must wait.

As twilight fell, ten of us—myself amongst them—crept down the cleave side and moved cautiously towards the river; we carried two buckets apiece, and our only weapons were daggers. A detachment was to follow us as far as the river side in case we should need assistance.

Just below our plateau, however, the rocks ran too steeply into the water for us to fill our buckets there; and we wandered off round the corner, out of sight of our comrades, still looking for a convenient place: perhaps we had gone half a mile before we found one.

It was quite light yet; the cleave was still and peaceful; the cool blue shadows breathed with a little evening wind. There was no sound but the canvas buckets splashing into water.

I looked up. A large rock, just a little way beyond, had stirred in the most unaccountable manner. I looked at it again, more closely; nothing. I began to fill my second bucket.

And then the rock came to life . . . quite silently. A large band of men rose up from behind it, ragged brown men with hooked noses and round, sunken, fierce black

eyes, who pointed their guns at us and motioned us to surrender. It was at once terrifying and unreal—that wordless capture, in the cool of evening, in the deep peace of our little cleave.

There was nothing to do. One shout for help and we should have been killed on the spot. We stood there, petrified, while one of them came over and took our daggers from their sheaths; because I had no dagger one of them spoke to me in Turkish, and I stared at him, my teeth chattering and little beads of cold sweat on my forehead.

As we moved off, I whispered to the man nearest me:

“Who are they?”

“*Kurds!*”

Kurds. I remembered Stepan’s body, roped across the back of a sweating horse, and the stories of unspeakable tortures they had practised on other captives; there was nothing but evil and agony to be expected from these people—these mongrel gypsies, part Turkish, part Persian, part Satan himself.

Was there any hope for us at all. We rounded another twist, and their leader called a halt, and looked us over. When his eyes fell on me, he started, stared more intently, and began to smile to himself; then he entered into a loud conversation with the Kurd in charge of us.

“You talk Turkish, Ivan,” said one of the Cossacks. “For God’s sake, what are they jawing about? Go over and speak to them.”

"What shall I tell them?" asked Ivan.

"Idiot, tell them you speak Turkish."

Ivan slouched over, and began to talk with the leader; at last: "He wants to know if she's really a girl," he flung at us over his shoulder. "He says she's to take her jacket off."

I hesitated. "Do as he tells you, *malyi*," someone whispered fiercely, "otherwise they will cut our throats just for the fun of it."

I stripped off my jacket, and the Kurdish leader sauntered over to me. He looked like a walking rag heap, for it was quite impossible to tell where one garment ended and another began. Through his filthy tatters I caught a glimpse of even filthier skin. As he looked me over his round brown eyes were very like an animal's eyes. He licked his lips incessantly. He broke into a wide, almost toothless smile, and laughed queerly down in his throat. Then he touched my face. I shivered and closed my eyes, but made no attempt to resist him. He smelled vilely, with a smell that I hope never to encounter again. His hand wandered through my hair, over the back of my neck, round under my chin. And he laughed so strangely that I could stand it no longer. I jumped back, picked up my jacket, and thrust it on.

The Kurd said something to Ivan.

"He wants to know what you are doing here."

"Tell the old — that she's a wounded Cavalier of St. George," said Gritsko, with desperation in his voice. "Spin him a yarn, Ivan, can't you?"

Ivan did his best; just as he seemed on the point of giving out, I found my voice. "Ask him if I can go to the river and wet my bandage," I said; and, consent being given, I sat down, pulled off my boot, and started to unwrap the bandages. The Kurd commander examined my wound intently, and made no attempt to stop me when I walked off to the river. Bending down to dip my bandages into the river, I suddenly realized that we had been moving downstream all this while, for there, caught in the rocks below me, was a canvas bucket which I had dropped in my fright a good half mile back. At the foot of the cleave, then, about a mile upstream, the small detachment that had been sent to guard us was still waiting.

Ivan called me back.

"He wants to see your Cross. I told him you blew up a bridge across the Araks, and he wants to know how you did it."

While the commander fingered my Cross, Ivan added:

"Tell 'em any story you like, *malyi*, and I'll interpret it. Stick it on. A Kurd will give anything for a good story. If they like it, they'll take us back to their officer. Otherwise it's all up with us."

And so I began my story.

I shall never tell another one like that, in so strange a setting, to so hideous an audience. It was growing very dark, and though the sky above us was still blue, one could detect the beginning stars here and there. The



river whispered and muttered. The wind was growing colder, setting up an empty moan under the cleave walls.

I need not repeat my story in detail. Fear made me decorate that tale with the most extravagant fancies; Ivan's voice trembled with emotion as he passed it on to the listening Kurds. Then I noticed that they were quite genuinely fascinated by what I was saying.

I began to walk upstream. . . .

Terror was my guide, and nothing more than terror. I could not have stopped talking then, even if I had been told to. I could not have stopped walking upstream, even if they had realized where I was leading them. But they didn't. Limping—partly from nervous exhaustion, partly from the ache in my leg—I leaned on the arm of Ivan on one side . . . and of the Kurd commander on the other. I was telling them how two men burned the two wooden bridges, single-handed. . . . We had rounded the first curve of the cleave and were mid-way to the second; I took one look at Ivan, and the whites were showing all around his eyes. . . . How, under cover of the flames and the smoke, a charge was laid beneath the concrete bridge. Fear lent me a romantic skill which surprises me even to-day. The more exciting my story became, the more dramatic became Ivan's interpretation of it, and the more it intrigued the Kurd on whose arm I was leaning, and the Kurds who were following. We were almost at the second curve now.

We were rounding it.

"And then," I said, "there was an explosion like the end of the world——"

"Halt! Give up your arms!" It was Kurny's voice.

The Kurd dropped my arm. His followers, so intent upon the story that they had lost all sense of danger or direction, were too amazed to make any resistance. They just stood there, with their mouths open.

I limped over to our men.

"Here are some Kurds for you," I said—but my voice was only a hoarse croak.

I sat on the ground, nursing my leg which was really painning me very badly. As I sat there I heard one of our *sotnia* say: "That girl brought in forty Kurds, single-handed!"

"What a fool!" I thought. "If only you knew how frightened I was." But I was too tired and too confused to argue with him; or with the *sotnik* when he patted me on the shoulder and said: "I'm proud to have you in the Company. You used your head, *synok*. You deserve the Cross"; or with Kurny when he called me "a real hero."

The next day we moved off the plateau, and I was summoned to headquarters, where the *sotnik* brought me before our general once more, who told me that it would be his great pleasure to recommend me for a second soldier's Cross of St. George. There was no arguing with the general, so I saluted and got out of the room just as quickly as I could.

It was not long before the story came back to me, with

all the embroidery of a hundred re-tellings. . . . I had crept out into the cleave, alone and armed with nothing more than a dagger, and had captured a hundred Kurds!

And so, for all I know, it may still be told.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### SKIRMISH

A FEW days after this, we moved back towards that same river, but somewhat farther upstream this time, where its course opened out into a gentle valley, and a narrow pass wound across the range. One evening, as we sat in our encampment above the valley, Kurny came in to tell us that we must look over our sabres before going to sleep; the *sotnik* was taking a special company down with him to hunt for Kurds who were reputed to be hanging round the pass in considerable numbers.

"They need a lesson," he pronounced, "and we're going to give them one. We start at one o'clock. You, Maria, stay on duty to-night, and wake me up just before one."

The nights were cold up there. Wrapped in a *boorka*, the new Cavalier of St. George was proud to stand guard while the men snored—up till about midnight, that is, when she began to grow very drowsy and wondered why on earth they couldn't allow her one hour's sleep before going into action.

In fact, I was so annoyed by the time one o'clock came

that I took it all out on Kurny, giving him a particularly vicious kick in the ribs.

No answer—unless a pig's grunt could be taken for one.

I clenched my teeth and kicked him again.

"God save us and protect our Tsar," he mumbled, half asleep. "Hey, Maria, what the devil are you doing?"

"Get up, it's after one."

"What for?"

"Well, aren't you going out this morning?"

"Save us! I forgot all about it. Run and wake the *sotnik* and don't leave him till he's up. Come back with him."

I ran off in great excitement. Here was a chance I had been longing for ever since my return: a chance to earn my Cross in a proper engagement, riding into battle with the *sotnik* leading us; I knew only too well that I had done nothing to deserve my honours so far. Outside the *sotnik's* quarters I gave his orderly a great poke in the ribs; but he was worse than Kurny. He merely opened one eye and went comfortably back to sleep again, so I walked in and shook the *sotnik* gently by the shoulder, and he sat up—wideawake on the instant—and glanced at his wrist watch.

"H'm. Ten after one. Why are you late, *synok*? . . . Don't waste time explaining now; cut off to *sotnik* Davydov, see if he's getting ready, and report back to me here. Jump to it."

I couldn't help wondering at the difference in men; how Kurny had forgotten all about the expedition and

how the *sotnik* woke up immediately, his mind clear and alert. It wasn't just a question of training; Kosel, who had none of an officer's advantages, wouldn't have behaved as Kurny did.

The Gorsk-Mosdosky Polk was not difficult to find; *sotnik* Davydov had already drawn his men up outside his quarters and was talking earnestly to them. When I returned with him I found our *sotnia* all mounted and ready.

It was then that I received the shock of my life.

"You go to my quarters if you like, *synok*," the *sotnik* told me, "and sleep in my bed. It'll be a change after the ground, eh?"

Go to his quarters? Sleep? I was abominably hurt, for I felt that I had a right to fight with them; hadn't I been given one St. George's Cross, hadn't I been recommended for a second? I stared after them as they rode away, my mind working furiously.

Then I dashed off to find my horse.

It was easy to follow them, unseen, at a safe distance; easy, when the two *sotnia* split up, to join in with the rearmost of Davydov's men, for none of them knew that I had been ordered to sleep or paid the slightest attention to me.

We were moving cautiously down the hill. There was nothing to be heard but the sound of slipping hoofs and Davydov's occasional low commands: "One horse distance," "Two horse distance." Then at last: "Halt." We had stopped within a hundred yards of the valley, where,

in the darker protection of a shallow gully, Davydov began to explain the work that lay ahead of us.

The deep twilight of a moonless summer's night was turning perceptibly from dark grey to dull grey, like something waking from a long sleep. In the sky that filled the opening of our gully there floated the ghost of a single rose, delicate and remote. . . . Ararat's far distant peak had caught the sunrise.

"*Sotnik* — has moved farther up the valley. The Kurds are now between us and him. He will attack them and, if he can, drive them down towards us. If he succeeds, we shall have a fine surprise for them here."

Two men dismounted and crept out to keep a watch up the valley. The rest of us sat in our saddles like statues, waiting.

A distant thunder of hoofs from up the valley, a ragged volley, a shouting—minute and exact in the chill air. . . . "They're on the run, your nobleness. They'll be level with us in five minutes."

"Steady!" *Sotnik* Davydov rode up to where he could scan the valley and sat there, against the skyline, silent and upright.

Suddenly his sabre leapt out, pointing downwards and ahead: "Full run to level ground and catch them in the flank!" We came out of that gully, down the last fifty yards of slope, gathering speed with every yard, thundering across the open ground. My horse needed no guidance from me. Once I pulled on the reins, but he slipped;

so I let him have his head. I decided that he knew far more about it than I did.

We were moving on a right-handed diagonal to where a band of Kurds, their coloured scarves streaming in the wind, were being ridden hard by my own *sotnia*, so hard that they had no time to ford the river and break into the opposite line of hills.

Then I discovered that I had lost all sense of fear.

They were taken by surprise—greeting our arrival with a sudden reining in of their horses; and as we crashed into their flank, my own *sotnia*, headed by our *sotnik* and Kurny, came yelling in amongst their rear.

The half-risen sun was staining the whole valley blood red.

Some of our men were screaming out in Turkish. A man beside me grunted the Cossack "Heads we will cut off" as he slashed right and left of him. My own sabre, apparently of its own accord, carved the empty air; I was too excited to see clearly, and when a blade whistled like a dark bird over my head, I only laughed.

We were zig-zagging to and fro, dodging fallen men and horses. I could hardly distinguish friend from enemy, and cannot tell to this day how I came through that first onset without a scratch.

Davydov's men, and myself among them, had ridden clean through the enemy and were reining up. Behind us, sabres flashed red in the bloody light above a yelling, moaning confusion of Cossacks and Kurds; somewhere



in that melee the *sotnik* and Kurny were fighting. I turned my horse with the rest and urged it into a gallop.

As we closed in again, a black-eyed Kurd came at me full tilt, and I took a tight grip on my sabre, assuming the futile first posture in sabre drill; in the split second before his arrival I knew that I was entirely at his mercy and that I didn't care. The picture I have now is this: his rolling black eyes, and the upsweep of his curved sabre; then a silver streak through the air—and one of those rolling eyes was gone. Gone as if someone had thrown a bottle of red ink which smashed as it struck him. As he galloped past me he was already half out of his saddle, and in the very corner of my vision I saw him fall.

I turned to see who had done it; and as I turned, another Kurd appeared beside me, his sabre ready. Zing! His sabre and the arm which held it parted at the elbow, and he howled miserably and sank forward on his horse's neck. I raised my own blade, with the vague idea of putting an end to him when somebody caught at my arm.

"Get out of this, *synok!*"

It was Kurny—Kurny who, with two mighty blows, had twice saved my life.

And at that very moment it was all over. The yells and groans had turned into a single Russian word: "Victory!" My horse was being swept along with the rest; the Cossacks were racing about the Kurds in a great circle and had them completely surrounded. One after another they raised their arms in surrender.

I was conscious of a sort of pricking in my finger, and

I looked down at it. It was dripping with blood. The last Kurd, who was aiming for my stomach, had just nicked me before Kurny got him. I smiled with relief; something at least to show for my Cross.

The two *sotniks* drew their commands back, and men rode in the rear urging the Kurds to greater speed. As we rode back through the valley it was all a misty gold.

"How the devil did you come to disobey orders?"

We were back in our lines, and I was standing trembling before the *sotnik*.

"Do you know what this means?"

"Yes, your nobleness," I said weakly.

"It means I am going to punish you. I am going to make an example of you." His voice rose in anger. "I am going to make such an example of you as the whole company won't forget in a hurry. You are a soldier, and you're going to learn that soldiering isn't play."

How could I tell him that I was ashamed to wear my Cross until I had earned the right to wear it?

"This is what I am . . ." He stopped in mid-speech. He was staring at my hand, raised in salute. Blood was trickling down my wrist from the little scratch on my finger.

His eyes softened. "Why, child, what has happened to your hand?"

"It is nothing, your nobleness, I am sorry I disobeyed. I thought I was being left behind simply because I had stood guard all night and was sleepy. I . . ."

He broke in with: "Report to Kurny at once. See that someone dresses it for you"—and turned abruptly away.

I found Kurny, and told him that I had been ordered to report to him.

"I don't want to see you," he said angrily. "Go and get some sleep, and thank heaven you're alive to get it."

Then he, too, saw the blood and hurried me off to the Red Cross station, standing anxiously by while a *sanitar* washed it away. When the little nick was at last revealed, in all its insignificance, he laughed.

"A Kurd lost his arm for that scratch," he said. "You blood-thirsty little *babba*, you may thank me for seeing you when I did, or his sword would have made a nice mess of your guts."

I could see that, while he was still angry with me for taking a foolish chance, he was also very relieved that I was alive.

And I could not say a word to thank him, because my throat was choked with tears.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### DEATH IN THE SNOW

WITH the autumn of 1915 there came strange, unsatisfactory rumours. Instead of sending us provisions, trainloads of ammunition arrived; and yet, while battle after battle was being fought on the Western Front, we had not even had a decent skirmish. What was the ammunition for? You cannot eat gunpowder. The word "treachery" was being muttered about the camps, though what kind of treachery nobody could tell—except that the government was obviously slowing things up in the Caucasus. We did not know then that the situation on the Western Front was exactly reversed—plenty of food but no ammunition. We did not know that our transport officers had discovered train loads of provisions rotting on the sidings far beyond our lines.

The officers were luckier than the men. Some of them went away on leave and were seen no more; and word reached us that they had been transferred to the Western Front. With the restless spring in their blood, our Cossacks could not bear to hear these stories; they felt cheated and insulted, grumbling that they were no more than

frontier guards. At last several companies sent their best soldiers with the petition that they too should be transferred, and the officers, thinking to remove the trouble-making element, agreed: very much to their sorrow, for the whole army wanted to move with them, and for a few days I thought we were going to have a private war among ourselves.

Scurvy added to our difficulties, for we had been reduced to a constant diet of thin soup. There was nothing else. The whole neighbourhood had been plundered bare and most of its inhabitants had fled.

Some of these Armenians tried to go over to the enemy.

I remember the first time I ever saw one of these, on his return. I was out with my Hundred, riding somewhere beyond the last camp, when we came across him. He had not been treated very hospitably; no doubt there was a food shortage among our enemies too. This one had had his left eye burned out. His right hand had been chopped off at the wrist. They had slit his tongue. How far he had walked, we could not guess; at the time of our meeting, he was crawling along the ground and—what with the blood and the mud on him—scarcely looked human at all.

Somebody dismounted and touched him with the end of his boot, as one might touch a new kind of worm. He turned his horrible, mutilated face upward and mumbled something that should have been words. Somebody else laughed and flung a crude joke at him. It was only an

Armenian, after all, turning his blood-stained face up into the sunlight. And I—I leaned over my saddle and was sick.

They laughed at me, too—all but Kurny.

All that autumn stray Armenians were sent back to us—with hands or ears or legs or tongues cut off. Russia greeted them coldly, although the Red Cross did whatever could be done with them. But with the field hospitals full of scurvy cases, and medical stores lacking, there was little hope for them with us. As for the villages we had plundered, they were worse than deserted. A few of the people lingered on there, gaunt and half naked, caricatures of a once handsome people, their mouths stained with the grass which was all they had to eat. Bands of starving children swarmed over the country-side, breaking into houses, attacking lonely travellers on the chance of finding one piece of black bread. So desperate were these pitiful little creatures that they were known to tear a man limb from limb like wolves, and corpses were discovered in desolate places with the flesh half gnawed off them. Things got so bad that army patrols were sent out to round these children up and they were herded together and shipped away, I hoped to something better.

But were we to spend another winter in this place? I think we should certainly have mutinied before long, had not rumours, starting at headquarters, assured us of real action along the Caucasian front, throughout the coming winter. The Grand Duke Nicholas, it appeared, was coming to the Caucasian front as Commander-in-chief; and at

this news the army suddenly took heart again, for Nicholas was the idol of Russian soldiers. There were all kinds of rumours afloat—rumours that intrigue and demotion—were responsible for this great man's coming to us, but everybody was thankful for the news. Within two days of the official confirmation everything was packed, shops, kitchens, hospitals—and ammunition. At least we had plenty of ammunition.

The direction was south-east. At last the Turk, our traditional enemy for centuries, would get a taste of Cossack fury, pent up so long on monotonous border duty. In the beginning it was thrilling. The men sang their bragging war songs as they rode: "Heads we will cut off and keep to count, but bodies we will leave for the wild beasts"—songs which excited me so much that I joined in too, with a sort of horrified shudder. I used to lie awake at night thinking of them, wondering how we could cut off heads, and where we would keep them. It was too late to back out, even if these things grew more horrible the more I thought of them. All I hoped was that they wouldn't think me a soft-hearted *babba*; and I vowed myself I wouldn't give them a chance—unless they made me count the heads.

We discovered that we were headed for the lesser Mount Ararat.

The weather was growing more stormy, and the country more mountainous; yet strangely enough I can never remember a storm at sunrise; nor shall I ever forget how quiet and gentle the roughest soldiers grew then, and how

they hushed their voices just as though they were afraid of wakening someone.

When I should have been busy with camp work, I used to idle, watching the sun come up. You must have lived in a mountain country to realize what one saw then—how the winter sky lit up with a glorious red and white, turning at last into deep purple; how the lofty snows glowed deeply in contrast; how you could almost hear the eternal quiet, high above it all.

But the farther we got into the mountains, the more difficult things became for us. Cavalry and infantry might cross them without too much trouble, but it was no easy matter for heavy transport trucks and artillery. And the higher we went, the less we had to eat, for our unwieldy kitchens lagged farther and farther behind. There were few villages, and those few too poverty-stricken to supply us with food; sometimes a goat fell prey to an army rifle; but almost the only food we had was what we carried with us. Tobacco gave out too, and the men were reduced to smoking dried horse dung.

The mountains were becoming so steep that we had to use mules as pack animals—intelligent and willing beasts. We used to tie ropes on their shoulders and send them clambering up the more difficult peaks; and they would calmly brace themselves at the top, for the men to climb up, holding on to the ropes. And after the men, the horses were dragged up.

We were called upon to help the artillery across a



difficult pass. A gun had stuck fast half-way up a difficult incline and men and mules had gone up ahead with ropes tied on them, to pull from above while others pushed from below. Although the sky was dark with rain clouds, it was freezing cold. My breath hung like a heavy mist in the air as I stood and watched them.

I had wanted to go forward and help, but Kurny told me he had orders to leave me with the horses. I knew he lied, because our officer had not been with us for two days; but I knew, too, that my strength would have been of little use—for several hundred men, cursing as they pushed, could make no headway. The moment that gun had been shoved a little way up the hill, it would roll back—sometimes twice the distance that had been gained. More mules and more men—it seemed they almost lifted the gun into the air and carried it; but still it slid backward.

And then a yell from the officers: "Hold it! Hold it!"

For a moment the whole mass stayed absolutely still—in single, gigantic, desperate effort.

Then the mules and men above were yanked into the air; hung for the least part of a second against the sky, a black, thrashing nightmare of legs and arms; and plunged down, down. The gun had broken away!

You might as easily have held back an onrushing locomotive. It went crashing down the mountain side, scattering rocks and dirt as it went, right into the climbing men and beasts. The noise it made was like the noise of somebody crushing black beetles; I know no other way to

describe it, and it sounds in my ears to-day as clearly as it sounded then, above the curses of men and the high shrieks of horses.

Some had been smashed to death in its passage. They were the lucky ones. There were others who had not quite avoided it, and who lay twisting in the mud, their legs broken, or their arms crushed and mangled. The horses I cannot talk about. . . .

I went down to see what I could do; I will not pretend that I went willingly, or that I was the slightest use. The head of the first poor fellow I came to looked like nothing so much as an exploded orange; the second man was still alive but bleeding to death, and I got a piece of white waste which slowly soaked up the blood.

Far over the pass, there came a distant voice, singing through the bitter air: "Heads we will cut off and keep to count——"

The dying man groaned over and over again: "Oh, mother dear, if only you knew how much it hurts." I stood near him, with my head turned away, and cried; I was still there when Kurny found me. . . .

*Sanitars* or stretcher bearers came hurrying back down the pass with stretchers and the wounded were left to their care, while the rest of us climbed on. It grew colder and colder; the rain turned to snow, the snow to ice—driven into our faces by a howling wind; there were no trees to protect us, nor had we time to dig shallow trenches for shelter; our only food for mess was *subari*, tasteless dried bread, rather like the congealed paste that a bill-

board man might use for sticking on his posters, and so hard that I broke a tooth on my portion. If it had not been for Kurny, who never left me, I should have died on those mountains; I crept close to him that night for warmth, though I could not sleep; and as I stared into the darkness I saw nothing but a man—slowly bleeding to death, but never dying, never quite dead.

Next morning we reached the plateau where our station lay. But most of our army had not yet won its struggle with those merciless slopes behind us; for days afterwards an icy wind swept down through the passes; for days afterwards men staggered in, all of them exhausted, some of them terribly frost-bitten. But I did not realize what havoc had been wrought until Kurny told me one day to go down to Nakichevan, the nearest town, where our headquarters were.

Nakichevan lay on the other side of the mountain, and the roads that led to it were not at all bad; in fact, some of them could almost be called highways. But all the way we passed field hospitals, every one of them filled to overflowing with victims of the cold and I realized then how lucky I had been to get through. Why had we been forced to make that brutal ascent on the other side, when we could have come up this way?

At Nakichevan I was surprised to find everything running smoothly, everyone smiling and content. They did not seem to realize what hardships we were undergoing up there on the mountain top; or if they realized, they did not care. Our *sotnik* was there—he bore the same name as

a general on the staff; and the three men who had been sent down with me grumbled that that was why we had not seen him, why he had stayed below, instead of sharing our troubles with us. He was undoubtedly the general's nephew or his son—or, as they were inclined to think, his bastard.

I met him not long after my arrival. I was standing idly in the street, when a voice said over my shoulder: "Why, child, is it you? Are you still with the outfit?"

I saluted. "I have not found my father, your nobleness."

"Do you want to go home?"

"I have no home, your nobleness."

"Well, for that matter we are all far from home." A pause while he stared at me. Then at last: "You shall be my orderly for this afternoon. Report at two o'clock."

And at two o'clock I found myself in the *sotnik's* room.

It was filthy—the floor littered with cigarette butts; dirty glasses on the window-sill; the bed unmade, piled high with coats and belts; on the table, among the books and papers, a piece of evil-smelling sausage; the whole place stinking of *mahorka* and stale spirits.

But on the dressing-table, side by side with the leather-framed photograph of a beautiful girl, lay a lovely, fat herring.

I went round the place, tidying up, with that herring in my mind and before my eyes. I could not keep my thoughts off it; my mouth watered, my head was dizzy with desire for it. I knew that it would be missed—it was

about the only fresh thing in the place. But as I cleaned the table, and swept the floor and fixed the bed, I was wondering whether I shouldn't risk taking it.

And I was just going to do so when the *sotnik* came in.

He seemed a little nervous, I thought. He walked to and fro, picking up papers and putting them down. He lit a cigarette, and crushed it out before he'd taken two puffs. At last he came over to me, where I stood waiting to be dismissed.

"You are a good girl, making my room so clean for me. Are you always a good girl, heh?"

He looked at me so oddly that I began to blush, and hated myself for blushing. I did not want to be thought a girl—I was a soldier. But something had to be said, so:

"I—I think so, your nobleness," I stammered at last.

"You *think*? You don't know? You ought to know a thing like that."

His fine eyes had become quite vacant, and I was astonished to see how stupidly he was smiling; then, as a little saliva crept out of the corner of his lips, I grew frightened. But I dared not move.

He pinched my ear, and put one hand round my shoulders; he unbuttoned my jacket with the other hand and his fingers crept inside, stroking me gently. And then—I suppose because I was shaking all over—he muttered:

"What is the matter, child?"

I was so terrified that I said the first thing that came into my mind.

"I want that herring, your nobleness."

At that he started, like a man shaken out of a trance, laughed wearily, and pushed me away.

"Very well, *malyi*. Take your herring. You've done a good job here. You are dismissed."

That same evening we left for the mountains, my three companions all very drunk, though they tried very nobly not to show it. As we came out of the valley and began to climb, a thin, sharp sleet struck us in the face, driven down by a wind that howled and sobbed through the narrow pass like a human being in terror. It took us all night to reach the top.

By the time we came in sight of camp it had stopped snowing and the sun was almost up. And there, across a great ocean of silver waves, was a thick, black zig-zag; marching soldiers—soldiers who had struggled all night long up the long, terrible way that we had taken not so many days before.

Under the sunrise, in the great peace of snow, men moaned and cursed God for their misery. A few were praying—only a few. Because of a lack of stretcher bearers, those whose hands and feet were frost-bitten had had to struggle along as best they might; it was either that or death.

We rode past them as quickly as we could. The foot soldiers were terribly ragged; many of them did not even possess a pair of boots, and the snow was stained with blood from their torn feet. My memory of them now is like a gallery of faces, turned up to us as we went past. White faces with black-ringed eyes; faces so pinched in

with hunger that they were more canine than human; beards stiff with ice; blue lips. And one face—a face which, whenever I see it now, I cannot really believe in, it is so grotesque. Its owner must have suffered frost bite the day before and been treated with snow—too late; for in the middle of it, where the nose should have been, was a red pulp, stiff with newly frozen blood. Underneath, the lips had shaped themselves into an insane grin. They screamed at us as we rode by. Our men crossed themselves and muttered a prayer to the saints; and I found myself doing the same thing.

At our post, Kurny was given a message from the *sotnik*, a message which seemed to please him enormously. He told me that we were leaving at once for Nakichevan. . . .

For a moment, my heart stood still.

The order had seemed to have something to do with me. Could they have found a man called Kolesnikov, who really came from the little *stanitsa* I had mentioned? Were they planning to hand me over to him? I didn't dare ask, and how could I manage to wait? I told Kurny I was very sleepy, and that if I went I would probably fall off my horse.

No, I had to go.

Perhaps it had something to do with that incident of the herring—an incident I didn't much want to remember. Yet the *sotnik* had looked rather sad when he dismissed me—as though he would have apologized, if he could have found the words.

Well, worrying wouldn't help matters. Kurny gave me one hour to sleep while he made ready. I rolled up. I went down into one of those deep sleeps of real exhaustion; not a dreamless sleep—I was riding in the snow beside that suffering army, and the *sotnik* was touching my shoulder, shaking it.

"You are a real Cossack, Maria. It takes artillery to wake you up," said Kurny. "Come, we are going."

I was so sleepy that I did not come to life until we were half-way down the mountain. Below us, the clouds lay over Nakichevan, some like thick milk, others like steam. Kurny started talking about vapours, and condensation of the air, and other physical phenomena. He reminded me of somebody else, somebody who belonged to a very distant past, somebody I had to grope in my mind to remember. I was astounded when I recalled who it was—Nicolai Ivanovitch, no less, our natural history teacher back in Ekaterinodar.

"Where did you go to school, Kurny?" I couldn't help asking.

Kurny laughed and swept his arm towards the horizon.

"My school has been the great big world," he said.

As we passed through the cloudy area—rainy, gloomy, and chill—we met *sanitars* struggling up with their two-wheeled mule carts, and a kitchen outfit stuck fast on a slope. An officer called on us to help, saying that all hands were needed; but when Kurny told him our orders and the name of our *sotnik*, he let us pass without another word. The *sotnik*, it seemed, was an important person.



Nakichevan was flat and dreary under the rain, filled with a sort of lifeless bustle—a great traffic of carts and horses, ploughing sullenly through its streets. There were times when our own horses went almost knee deep in mud.

When at last we dismounted outside our officer's quarters, I was so saddle-sore that I could hardly stand on my feet, and hadn't even the spirit to answer back at the *sotnik's* orderly when he offered me a bench inside the house with: "Here's a seat for a good little girl."

Kurny and the *sotnik* were talking in a corner—the *sotnik* offering Kurny the chance of a night in town, Kurny insisting that he had to go back at once. You great jackass you, I thought, if you were as sore as I am, you'd ask for three days' rest. All my unspoken thoughts these days were in some kind of army argot.

The *sotnik* put on his hat and *boorka*, and strode past me; he seemed deliberately not to look at me as I struggled to my feet and saluted. He did not even return the salute.

"You brute!" I muttered, as he left the house.

Kurny turned abruptly and gave me such a resounding whack on the back that I bit my tongue and saw stars. "I hope they'll be as nice to your children in purgatory," I screamed, beside myself with rage.

For a moment Kurny stared at me, open-mouthed. He was quite evidently shocked for he had never heard me use language like that before. Then he laughed and put his arm around me. "You're learning fast, *synok*. Perhaps it won't hurt you. Anyway, forget about purgatory."

I began to mumble apologies, but he interrupted them, saying in a reflective voice: "Maria, do you know that you are a real mascot? You have brought us luck—real luck." He grinned. "Do you want to hear some good news? No more mountain peaks until spring. Our *sotnik* was going to leave us to do some work in the Army Headquarters, but because you cleaned up his hut and was so nice about everything—those were his own words—he says he's going to stay on here and have our Hundred transferred to him for special service. The front line will be on the top range and God help them. But we'll be right here in Nakichevan."

I had never seen him so happy before. He threw his *shapka* into the air and ran out into the street and bought himself two enormous drinks of wine from a passing wine seller. It was rather a crude sort of drink. The wine seller simply tilted up his *borduke*—the dried skin of a sheep, one of his legs forming a nozzle—and poured the necessary amount into Kurny's open mouth. You have to be skilful at that kind of drinking, for if your mouth is a little out of the line, and the drink falls over you or on to the ground, you pay just the same.

When he came back, I asked him if I might sleep.

"Go to sleep with my blessings, *divchina*. But before you go take the curse of purgatory off my children. We may both see them one day." Happy and confused, though I was not at all sure what he meant, I curled up on the bench, and fell asleep.

I was awakened by the *sotnik's* orderly, who entered

the room carrying a bowl of hot, rich vegetable soup, with large chunks of meat swimming in it. Kurny had gone, he told me, but I was to stay there: the *sotnik* was not coming home that night, and had left orders that I was to sleep in his bed. Then he brought me water for a bath and a clean suit of underwear, which—since it was made for a small man, and I had grown considerably in the past year—did not hang so very loosely on me.

That *sotnik* was past my understanding. The day before he had frightened me and apologized; then he had sent Kurny a message, transferring the Hundred to Nakichevan on my account; then, that very afternoon, he had ignored my presence; now he was offering me his room and his bed.

I went and stared at myself in his cracked shaving mirror as if I could read the secret of his behaviour there—then put it down in disgust. I was a soldier. Not a girl.

But the bath, my third since I entered the army, was delightful and, feeling that I might just as well take the *sotnik* at his word, I cut my hair with his scissors and cleaned my teeth with his tooth brush. Then I undressed to sleep for the first time in almost a year.

When I awoke the orderly was placing some tea and bread by my bedside.

"Better eat your lunch before it gets cold," he said. "It comes from the officers' mess. Do you know it's past noon, *synok*?"

And then he asked:

"If you don't need me for anything, may I go to town?"

I'm afraid that I was rude enough to burst out laughing.

"Why should I need you?"

"The *sotnik* left orders that I was to look after you," he answered. And when I gave him my "permission," he thanked me in the most humble way.

It was all very strange: so strange that there should be a sequel. But I am afraid there isn't. I was still young enough to accept his behaviour as part of the unpredictable ways of officers; but his treatment of me after that was perfectly normal. Perhaps he was a little kinder—but there were no more incidents like the incident of the herring. As I look back on it now, I think he may have allowed me that one night of comfort in his bed out of remorse—and it is not in the Russian nature to do things by halves. But that is only a guess.

Anyway, I had a second bath and went to bed again—two luxuries I could not afford to miss. It was very early in the morning when Kurny woke me with:

"Good morning, your high nobleness. Will you deign to get up at once and clean the horses? We have arrived, and we are all very tired."

The Hundred was stationed on the outskirts of the town where three small houses had been provided for it. The men had been assigned to special patrol duty—capturing deserters and searching for spies among the Armenians.

That was an ugly, tedious work in which I took no part.

I had other troubles to reckon with. I had never exchanged many words with my comrades, except Kurny; and now I avoided both them and him. Kurny used to complain sometimes that I looked sullen and hunted; he asked me if I were homesick. I was, but I dared not tell him, for fear he would send me away; and however terribly I needed my mother at times, yet I had a grim determination to stay on with the army and see things out. The house we were quartered in had an elementary convenience which made my life in any way tolerable for the next few months. I will not be thought to boast when I say that, under these conditions, I became more inured to hardship than the roughest soldier in my Hundred.

All that December on the heights about Nakichevan a half-frozen army clung to an irregular line. Below, we knew only that the forces of Russia were slowly manœuvring into position along the Turkish front, so slowly that we had long ceased to expect action and had become resigned to dullness.

But January of 1916 came in with a new sound—the sound of a great army assembling for battle.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### THE GRAND DUKE STRIKES

DAY and night, day and night, men marched in by the thousands; the great guns rumbled up from the railhead day and night; day and night our ears were filled with a grim, mechanical, unbroken rhythm.

Men were coming in from all parts of Russia and yet—unless my memory cheats me entirely—they all looked precisely the same: colourless, expressionless, endless regiments marching through the dead cold. They were not individual Russians any longer, they were just soldiers; they were not men who were going to die for their country, they were just men who were going to die.

Memory cannot be sifted under such conditions. Perhaps this drab picture, which is all that is left me of the Grand Duke's preparations for the great drive upon Erzerum, is a picture of our own state of mind and nothing more. For with a growing sense of disillusion came fear, and Cossacks are not supposed to know what fear means. It was less a fear of death than a fear of something which we could not hope to understand; after two years of inactivity we had suddenly come face to face with the World

War. Because I was young, I could accept it without argument; I did not ask myself why anything so inhuman should take command of us, or why I should be afraid.

I merely *was* afraid, and the fear has shaped my memories beyond any repair.

My companions were more often drunk than not, for the Red Cross units had brought in large stores of vodka and rum, and the authorities, perhaps wisely, began to serve out generous rations in the hopes that drink would keep our minds off the work that lay ahead.

No more laughter or singing; no more regard for Maria Kolesnikova. I don't mean that they were actively unkind to me, but that I, along with the rest of the great army, had become just another soldier too. There were thousands upon thousands of us who were there, waiting to be killed; you breathed in that feeling just as you breathed in the air itself; and my companions, living and eating and drinking without pleasure, in a sort of dull fever, let me see all the grossness of which a dispirited Cossack is capable.

Each day added something to an accumulation of petty, coarse experiences. I was not shocked so much as hardened; I lived meagrely inside a shell which nothing could penetrate. . . .

One group of men shuffles through my mind as representing all the meaning those days have left for me. These were the recruits, conscripted from the remote interior of Russia, roped into service like so many cattle, and sent down for a few days' training before going into action.

Many of them had never seen a railroad car before, and the long ride down seemed to have unbalanced them in some peculiar way—for when they arrived they were for the most part little short of demented. It was not that they screamed or gibbered or did anything violent; they simply marched into camp, shoulders hunched, heads down, and if they looked up as they passed, their faces wore a vacant expression which is the beginning of insanity.

I overheard two officers discussing these poor creatures, one afternoon, when I was standing watching some thousands of them go past.

“What in hell are we going to do with them?” said one. “No buildings for them; no hospitals; no way of sending them back—which is what we ought to do for all the good they are going to be—with every piece of rolling stock needed for something else.”

And the other answered: “Keep a heavy guard over them, until we go into action. They’ll be the first meat.”

*The first meat!* When the Grand Duke’s great offensive, so long promised and prayed for, actually began, there wouldn’t be any trumpets or flags or glory; just a crowd of useless half lunatics sent ahead on to the enemy’s guns. Nothing that had happened to me before mattered at all—I know that now: with that last phrase I came face to face with the World War for the first time, and I never turned my back on it again. . . .

The great drive towards Erzerum began one sunset at the end of January.



Our company was transferred to a field dispatch at the front lines, and a little of our old spirit returned to us, for this was feverish work, which gave one little time to think. But even in our few intervals of rest, we could not behave normally; we used to bolt our meals as though each one were going to be the last, and were never really relaxed except when we slept.

A mind numb with cold; the burden of fumes and smoke; the deafening roar of artillery; the trampled snow, filthy with blood; men gesturing to one another in sign language; men's faces, ghostly in the dark yellow and red glare of shells and of the fires they kindled. The advance was so crowded that, though I took no part in the fighting, I was rarely out of danger, and I never escaped from the sight of death.

Towards the end everything began to move very fast; for the Turk, who never realizes he is beaten until he is hopelessly beaten, suddenly broke, and we followed his routed army almost into Erzerum. I was a runner for the field office, and a good deal of my time was spent behind the front lines, so that in the last days of our advance, I had some leisure to see the relics of the Turkish *savve-qui-pent*.

Relics is the only possible word. Whether the winter is always as bitter in those parts I cannot tell; but with the first days of February it had turned the whole valley into a frozen hell, with a splintering wind howling down from the mountain. And all the way along the Turkish army stared at me—fezzed heads, staring out of the snow,

frozen in whatever expression death had granted them, a sort of gallery of death, preserved until the spring should release it. Camels and bullocks and horses lay stiffened by the wayside, with many and many a Russian whom our own burial parties had overlooked, and who were now too closely imprisoned in ice to be dug away.

For two weeks we battered away at the hills above Erzerum and at the great, smoke-laden mountain walls to the right and the left of them; for two weeks, in the valley's end, by the springs of the Araks, we tried to subdue the Turkish forts above us and learned that they had not been called impregnable without reason. The air was bitter cold, but so heavy with fumes and smoke that breathing itself often was difficult; the thunder of guns deafened us day and night; the sun seldom showed its face.

My job was to carry dispatches between field headquarters and the front line, and it would have taken a military genius to discover exactly what was supposed to be happening. This was essentially an artillery battle, and the foot soldiers, so it appeared, were being moved blindly from this post to that, as though at any moment they might be sent hurtling into the attack. But the attack never materialized. Time and time again, as the result of some message I carried, a whole regiment would be sent off into that thunderous yellow fog which was the battle of Erzerum. They moved, they waited, they moved again; the Turkish shells blew them to pieces, the frost

took them. Is there more to the story of a two weeks "battle" than that?

I escaped death so often in those journeys to and fro that I ceased to think of it, except as an explosion that one day I might not hear. I had no reaction to the battle that I can remember—neither fear nor amazement. Either your nerves give way altogether, snapping like the strings of a violin, or they grow so numb that nothing can break them. Only my comrades, among a whole army that had lost its appearance of humanity, refused to conform.

A stray shell, exploding near us, would send them plunging for cover, calling loudly upon God the Father for the protection of his angels' wings. A distant explosion meant curses on the Turks and loud boasts that big as their shells were, they couldn't find a man. On the whole they recovered a good deal of their lost spirit during those two weeks, for though none of them pretended any desire to be blown up in the front lines, the chances of a riding fight when the bombardment ended made everybody more cheerful. True, it was rather a crazy cheerfulness; but no man could hope to be normal with the great guns of Erzerum hammering at his eardrums, day in, day out.

About three days from the end the roads behind us vomited in fresh columns of troops, more guns, more ammunition; and on my errands to headquarters I overheard enough to tell me that the order had gone through to capture Erzerum, even if it took the whole army to do it. Somehow or other my Hundred, who could take no

part in the coming assault, began to play with the idea of death, and not a few of them begged me to write letters home in my spare moments. These letters made a strange impression on me; here I was, half deaf with the noise and the cold, writing to other men's wives about the children, the crops, the live stock, a cow's sore udder, a pregnant ewe; and almost invariably ending with, "If God please to kill me, pray for my soul"; and leaving a few tear blotches of my own in the folded paper. And already our Turkestan regiments were climbing among the frozen heights, to win what must always stand as one of the most unlikely victories in history; for the Erzerum forts, which no living soldier could have subdued by direct assault, were captured with a flank attack across some of the most hellish mountains in the Caucasus.

For two days the assault continued. I don't think any of us knew exactly what was going on in front of us; not even when the Turks blew up their forts that second afternoon. But suddenly the artillery fire died away, and a silence more awful than gunfire lay upon the hills and the frozen valley; until the night descended in pity, as though God Himself were bandaging the open sore that we had made there.

The next morning we moved forward into Erzerum.

Its chain of round, fortified hills, between which we rode in safety, still threatened us with their very quietness. Yesterday they had flamed and thundered; yesterday they had defied our guns; yesterday they had rolled back our armies, broken wave on wave. Now there was nothing to

be seen except the black tangle of barbed wire on each summit and the insignificant black remnant of a fort; but, as we drew nearer, that snow-dead silence of theirs crept right into our hearts and froze there.

The city itself was filled with Turkish citizens, going about their business as if nothing had happened—a peculiar fatalism, which happened to be justified, for Erzerum was not sacked. The ramshackle sentry boxes, each with the Ottoman crescent painted on it, housed Russian sentries; there were crude Russian notices posted on the street walls; there were long lines of Turkish soldiers waiting patiently to hand in their rifles at the different depots. But you could not have told that this was a city whose capture had decimated our army and spelled the utter defeat of Turkey, not only in Armenia but in Mesopotamia as well; it was too quiet, too friendly—with the prisoners and their captors actually fraternizing in the streets, and the citizens unmoved by what had happened to them.

My Hundred was still kept in the rear—very much to their disgust, since no more pleasant work could have been given them than the work of pursuing the broken enemy. Kurny, whom some business or other had taken up to the forts above Erzerum, came back, weary with his struggle against snow and wind, to tell us what he had seen from there. He grumbled how, beyond the frozen marshes in which the Euphrates had its beginning, he could see the irregular black clumps of the Turkish rear guard, and black lines creeping over the snow, where

the Cossack columns followed after them. We should have been there, he said; not trailing in the rear.

But in the rear we stayed as the battle went onwards into Erzingan. Ours was a wretched job—hunting up supplies with which to build a hospital—a job not too often recompensed with food, and never with good food. There was nothing to Erzerum at all—a cold labyrinth, the inhabitants of which pretended that we were not there at all; until at last you almost wished that the guns would thunder again from the mountains to shake that unconcern of theirs. Within the week there was nothing left for us to do; and when we rode out of the western gate, and down into the plain beyond, we felt like prisoners who had been released from solitary confinement.

We were to join the army at Sivas where, so rumour had it, the Turkish army, already broken, was to receive its *coup de grâce*. The plain beyond Erzerum was mute witness to violent pursuit and disorganized retreat; the dead of both armies lay mostly where they had fallen, frozen into a sarcastic afterthought upon the whole campaign; and for miles our way was decorated with bits of uniform, the Turkish fez beside the Cossack *shapka* in idiotic friendship, sabres, rifles, dead horses and camels, broken-down wagons, and the occasional abandoned ruin of a gun. The silence was appalling: the distant mutter of artillery lent it body and presence. The pariah dogs of Erzerum had fed so well during the siege and after that they could not be bothered to come out and break their teeth and claws on this frozen carrion; and there was nothing in that

whole waste alive but ourselves, our horses, and the few human scavengers who had dared to crawl out and face the unrewarding cold.

Beyond Erzingan the sound of guns grew louder, its echo fleeing dismally into the waste behind us; and the sky above Sivas was lurid with flame and smoke. When at last we reported to headquarters we were told to leave our horses and to attach ourselves to a field artillery unit to help carry ammunition. So we crept forward almost to the front lines, and found that our job was to dig ammunition dumps as far in advance as possible; hack them deep in the ground; pack them with shells; cover them with thick log doors and hope that the enemy gun fire would not blow them up while we were still at work.

Around us the battle wore the same confused appearance as it had at Erzerum. The same riot of artillery fire; the same bodies of infantry moving from this position to that with no purpose that I could fathom; the same choking stench in the air; the same yellow faces and glaring eyes; the same dirty red sky—half day, half night; and an ugly sun, a leering red face through the torn curtains of smoke.

Early one morning I was told to find my horse and take a message to the rear field office; and I have never been more happy in my life than I was to ride out of that battle front. A single terror pursued me—of being blown to pieces before I was clear away, for death is the most fearful when you are about to escape from it. My way led me towards the valley's edge and around beneath the curving

foot of a mountain, and with every yard we travelled the air grew more easy to breathe; my horse, snorting to expel the fumes of cordite from his lungs, seemed to share my relief with me and seemed, like me, to ask for nothing more than sleep.

As we wandered drowsily towards the rear, the road ahead of us began to fill with fresh soldiers, hurrying without eagerness towards the front; and when we came to where our road turned outwards under the hill, there was nothing for it but to choose a by-path that led upwards and so avoid them. The slope was gentle, and I had leisure to watch the men below me; for I was too weary to care whether the message I carried was important or not. The sun was just risen, so clean to look at that I could hardly believe it; and I looked down and saw the soldiers on their knees, praying with their faces towards it. . . .

My path, descending again towards the main road, opened up a new length of mountain ranges, their flanks grey-blue with shadows, their summits climbing into the sun and bright with lit snow. Right in the foreground, where a ridge of black rock strode into the valley, was a patch of white: a little *aui*, or Caucasian village, clinging to the rock. It may have been two miles away, but so clear in the thin air that I felt I could have reached forward in my saddle and gathered it into the palm of my hand; on the flat roof of the topmost house a minute figure stretched its arms to heaven.

For whom was this Mussulman praying—for us or our enemies? Whom was his god to destroy? And those



soldiers on the road—were they praying to their god to destroy the Turks and save our Christian empire? The thoughts moved idly in my head as I rode downward till they were thoughts in sleep. . . . How many gods were there, and which was the strongest? My horse, moving and stopping of his own accord, kept me from dropping off altogether.

Headquarters, seen from a distance, was a flag waving high above an unseemly huddle of buildings; and as I rode towards it I asked myself whether it would be possible to snatch some sleep there. It was not more than half a mile from the hill's edge, and I was soon dismounting at the doorway, my legs, once on the ground, scarcely able to support my body for weariness. The officer to whom my dispatch was addressed I discovered seated with a number of others around a little table in a very small and dirty room, still lamp-lit although it was high morning; they were poring over maps, their shoulders pressed together, and the room was swimming with rank cigarette smoke against which the lamp above their heads waged an unequal battle. When I'd got used to this unhealthy twilight, I could see that their faces were seamed with tiredness, and their eyes red and bleary, either from smoke or lack of sleep.

The message seemed to excite them, and I was afraid they would ask me how I had come to be so late. But no; the officer to whom I had delivered it called for a secretary and began to dictate a new dispatch. "It's all quite easy now," I heard him say to the table in general. "But Sivas

is higher than Erzingan and I expect to lose a good many men." His voice, at once nervous and weary, made a deep impression on me, for I had not yet grown used to the ease with which army officers condemn their soldiers to death. His hand shook as he handed me the dispatch. "Take this back immediately," he said, not caring to notice that I was swaying on my feet. As I rode away my mind played with the sickly thought that I was carrying a death message; and it seemed that not the officer but I myself was sending these soldiers into a costly battle and that, if I had the courage, I should tear the dispatch up and ride away into the hills.

Well, I said to myself, at least I will ride back by the hill path; for it gave me an obscure pleasure to disobey the officer's orders to make all the speed I could; and it must have been two hours or more before I entered the battle zone again. The sharp clean air, filled with brilliant sunlight, faded into half darkness. Once again the filthy stench of cordite and the labouring of my breath in my lungs. Once again the explosions that wrenched the earth apart, deafening my ears, and threatening me with a thousand shapes of death. The shelling from both sides seemed heavier, until at last I thought it would be unsafe to ride any more, and I left my horse tethered to a post and went onward afoot. All around me there was a great stirring of soldiers, moving to and fro in their purposeless manoeuvres: you do not know what a message I am carrying, I said to myself, you do not know that you have been condemned to death.

"What's the matter with you?" said Kurny, when I found him.

I told him that I needed sleep.

"*Sleep?*" he answered bitterly. "There will be little chance of sleep now, sonny, unless it is 'sleep for ever.' Not an hour after you left an order came through that we are to move forward this afternoon with the artillery and help fetch shells from the new ammunition dump."

I said that my own dispatch, if what I had heard was correct, carried the words for a new and dangerous advance, and I told him, as venomously as I could, of what the officer had said and how casually he had said it.

"This is probably the army's long-awaited chance to die for its little father the Tsar and its mother Russia." Kurny did not try to disguise his feelings. "But we are in the toughest spot of all; because if an enemy shell hits that dump"—he threw his hands upward and outward, his long fingers fluttering with an indescribable gesture—"a lot of feathers will fly, which will be us."

He went off with my dispatch—the effect of which was even more immediate than I had expected. Everywhere above the din you could hear the orders to advance being shouted down the line and, like men who have an over dose of some ugly drug, the army stumbled forward into the smoke of Sivas. You could not have said that any man moved of his own will; you could look all around you and see nothing but blank eyes, red-rimmed and burning, slack lips parted with a stupid grin, shaky hands, slouched backs; it was not so much "stumbled" forward as

“shambled” forward. Where were they all going? They were going to easy victory and certain death, and a nervous, unshaven officer had quite casually ordered them there after sitting up in a dirty little room all night.

We helped with the guns, so that we were very soon left behind the first wave of advance, for the winds of a week before had swept the loose snow into powdery drifts, frozen only on the surface, where the guns made hard going. The bitter cold had broken into an almost warm weather, and the snow was already greasy with the beginnings of thaw.

I know how the advance progressed by the way in which dead and wounded were disposed; how the living had walked over the bodies of the fallen, like men who walk in their sleep; how they had gone blindly over the open, ascending fields, without a wood to conceal them or any little hill. The dead had their faces trodden into the snow, and the wounded, too—those who had not the strength to turn away.

We had no time to spare for them. Behind us the heavy artillery thundered its barrage—its ineffectual barrage, since the heavy fields ahead of us were broken with the explosion of enemy shells. It was our business to see to the emplacements for new guns, and an engineer officer showed us where to carve out rough holes for the advancing artillery to roll into. When the advance line had been established near our dump, we were detailed to help carry the shells from there.

The guns literally devoured shells, and we staggered to

and from the great dump for what seemed hours and hours, an awful back-breaking job, none the easier because the enemy—whom we judged to be some miles away in the mountains—seemed to be getting our range. What unkind trick of fate made me carry my shovel along the last trip we made? Life has a much more fantastic pattern than most of us care to admit, for there I was with the shovel in my hand, which I had picked up for absolutely no reason—or rather for a reason which, so some people might say, had been proposed the very day that I was born.

I don't know that I believe in fate, but I do know that when we arrived at that dump a newly exploded shell had covered its log doorway with at least a ton of earth. While the others went back for their shovels, I began to dig by myself. My body was so tired that this new labour, which meant an entirely different set of movements from those required by the carrying of shells, could only be performed with the greatest care. As I put my shovel in for the first time, a shell burst not more than fifty yards from me, and to distract my mind I began to count the shovelfuls very slowly.

One, two, three. . . . Somebody else joined me, cursing under his breath as he started to dig; but who he was I shall never know. . . . Four, five, six, seven.

Oblivion.

How long had I lain there unconscious? Two or three hours, perhaps; for the long fires of after-sunset were

sliding down the west, and in the eastward sky a few stars had appeared. I was lying face upward. The night was striding towards me across the snow. It was very quiet; only the distant roar of guns told me that the advance had swept on and left me here alone.

I felt no pain, except a dull ache in my right arm, which seemed to be moving of its own accord: and by its movement, so unrelated to the rest of me, I discovered that my body was paralysed. My arm moved restlessly over the earth; turning my head, which ached hideously at the first motion, I could see the chevron on my left shoulder. The rest of me was buried in earth.

I was lying towards the rim of a shallow hole, conscious of little more than thirst and cold. Because the snow had been exploded away with the upper layer of frozen soil; because there had been a real warmth in the air that afternoon—the gathering cold had whipped me into consciousness, instead of sending me deeper into sleep. But I knew that it would get me before midnight unless somebody came to help.

“Help! Help!”

There was no sound in my voice at all. Perhaps the words got no further than my lips, thick and swollen as they were. But that soundless whisper had its echo in the most awful shooting pains in my eyes; and as I lay there helpless, a dismal answer came to me across the darkness.

It was the howling of dogs, pariah dogs or wolves; hunting along the edges of the night, so I thought, and certain to find me when it was entirely dark. They seemed

to be coming nearer, and I could do nothing, in the face of an exact image of being torn to pieces, but scrabble at the earth with my stiffening fingers, in the hope of covering up my face so that they would not find me. It seemed quite logical that they would not reach the hole until I was quite alone with the darkness, that they would circle round and round me coming nearer each time, that of all the dead and wounded on that plain I was the one they were sent to find. It was a waking nightmare really, for I must have been a little delirious; but gradually the fear disappeared, gradually those distant howls took on a more gentle and kindly note, gradually my brain gave way to a drowsiness that was the beginning of death. My sense of cold disappeared, my right arm lay numb and motionless, and my eyes, swimming into sleep, told me without surprise that some dozen stars had clambered down from the sky and were bobbing up and down at the edge of my hole.

The stars had found voices for themselves and were conversing together: "There's one of them down there!" "Only a stiff, better get on." "Go down and see, Sergei."—And my mind, wrenched out of sleep, began to mutter: "Help, brothers, help," though the words never reached my lips.

A lamp swung painfully before my eyes. "This one's alive, I think," said the *sanitar*; and the rest came trooping down and started to dig away at the earth which covered me.

They had got my body clear as far as the waist. "Care-

ful . . . here's a foot. Is this your foot?" The toe of a boot was sticking out of the earth at right angles, and since I merely stared vacantly at it without answering, one of the men began to clear the earth very carefully off it, until the whole boot was revealed, with a piece of paper sticking out of the top. My handwriting—one of the letters I had written. "Give that up; that isn't his foot. The leg runs off in the wrong direction."

So I shall never know whose dead body it was that shared its grave with me that night.

Gradually they freed my body, and I have a hazy recollection of the pain that flooded back into me when they set to work restoring my circulation. "Poor devil," said one of them cheerfully, "give him a drink of brandy." The brandy, working fire in me, is the last thing I remember.

Sometimes waking up for food . . . A car jolting . . . A distant mountain top . . . Sunlight . . . A cold wind blowing in a dark plain . . . A loud barracks . . . A railroad station.

These are the only fragments from a very long journey.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### THE GRAND DUKE

I WAS lying in a cool bed, and a nurse was standing beside the bed, watching me intently. I had come immediately awake, as one does after long unconsciousness, and I remember to this day the smooth stretch of white sheet, and the bright red of blanket where the sheet ended, and the air filled with subdued sunlight, and a bottle with some blue liquid on a table beside me, and a nest of purple veins in the nurse's cheeks.

"How do you feel?" It did not seem to me the most appropriate question to address to somebody who has quite forgotten why she should feel at all. The nurse was a middle-aged woman with an air of professional cheerfulness which does not work with every patient and did not work with me. I stared back into her hard, china-blue eyes trying to discover how she could possibly fit in with a sort of puzzle that lay at the back of my head; a puzzle with a good many of the pieces missing, which had all to do with lying somewhere in the dark, listening to something or other. I conjured my memory earnestly, trying to fit these new pieces in and making nothing of them.

"Well?" said the nurse rather too sharply. I realized that it would be quite necessary for me to make some answer.

"I don't know why I'm here," I replied in a very weak voice, which I just recognized as my own.

"You have had a slight concussion," she said. "You must go to sleep now, and then you'll be better in no time."

"Where am I?"

"In hospital"—she did not try to disguise her impatience.

"What hospital?"

"Tiflis. This—" she continued as though I were a dog and she were throwing me an undeserved bone—"is the officer's ward." She shrugged her shoulders, thereby shrugging away any responsibility for putting me there, and turned on her heels. In a moment she was back again, standing at the foot of my bed, her arms folded across her chest. "You are a very lucky girl, Maria Kolesnikova," she pronounced, her lips curling a little from her teeth, as though she had just eaten something sour. Then she walked off, and I turned my head on the pillow to watch her moving stiffly down a line of beds, until my head lurched with a sick pain, and I closed my eyes.

This, I thought to myself, is a woman who finds it hard to forgive me for being of the same sex; and, a little comforted by a gentle smell of flowers which drifted in and out of the pervading disinfectant, I fell asleep.

One hospital is very much like another to a person

whose mind is confused—or is “bruised” the right word for a mind in the condition mine was in then? I dare say that if I tried for the rest of my life I should not recover one single memory of the next two weeks that is as clear and empty as this first one. Afterwards, it was the nights that left an unfinished stamp of themselves on my mind, nights when I dreamed of dogs howling, and must have cried out in terror, for I have a dim recollection of nurses and *sanitars* leaning over my bedside. Nights, too, when I thought of death, and of Cossacks lying with their eyes open staring up at God; men who have been killed in battle look very dead. Then, unless I have it all wrong now, a voice that kept a sick rhythm with the throbbing in my head repeated over and over again that there wasn’t any hereafter.

There was a day, too, when a new and younger nurse brought me a bouquet of Persian lilacs which made me cry, because of the remembrance of my home; but I could not tell her why I cried. I remember that I thought the nurse kissed me on the forehead, and that her lips were thin and cool.

And a time when a group of officers tried to make me laugh, sitting on my bedside, telling me simple little jokes; and how I cried so hysterically that they had to go away.

Ten days, a fortnight—there was no measuring the time before the ward and its patients began making any sense. But at last I was talking quite coherently with the officer on my right, an engineer captain who liked to tell me stories of the bridges and railroads he had built; and

with the officer on my left, who was an aviator and had ideas about astronomy which he was thankful to unload on an attentive listener. Both these men were so good to me, and also an older officer who had some fascinating stories about ancient history, that I began to find the ward a very pleasant place; especially as the nurse whom I had seen on my first awakening seemed to have been moved elsewhere, for she did not trouble me again.

I was sleeping easily at nights now, though I still cried for no apparent reason. Everybody was careful not to make me laugh, because the doctor threatened to send me away to some sanatorium in the hills. "You have had shell shock," he said, "and you need quiet." And when I begged him to let me stay, explaining that I cried because of the Cossacks who had been killed, his answer was "No more jokes then." And there were no more jokes and I was permitted to remain.

Within two months I was convalescent enough to leave my bed by day, and wander about the ward. The officers made a good deal of fuss over me, because it amused them and relieved their boredom to have a girl sharing their room with them; they were very kind and gentle, and almost unnaturally careful about not making me laugh. They were mostly convalescent themselves, though there was one elderly man there who took a long time dying, with the screens all around his bed. I was allowed to take him a bunch of violets once, but he mistook me for his daughter or perhaps for his mistress—though to be sure I was little like a woman—and called me "Vittoria," and

held my wrist so long in his nerveless, yellow fingers that I began to shake all over with the tears running down my face. He died one midnight, and the next morning there was an empty bed with no screens around it, very much to our relief.

There was also a very embarrassing ceremony not long after they had discovered the records of my division. I had been recommended, it appeared, for another Cross of St. George—as a reward for being buried at Sivas, I suppose, though who was responsible for the citation I could never discover. At any rate, an officer presented it to me there in hospital, with a good deal of military ritual; and, what with the congratulations that followed from everybody in the ward, I fairly burst into tears, which was no way to receive a decoration for valour. Nor could I rid myself of the feeling that I had done nothing to deserve it—an unpleasant truth, but the truth none the less.

It was my aviator friend who made himself responsible for my future. He and I received our notice of discharge on the same day. He told me that he was going to report for duty at the flying field but when I demanded to be taken along he said that only soldiers who had never been wounded and were a hundred-per-cent healthy could be admitted into aviation. "But you are wounded," I answered, rather impertinently. "Ah, yes," he said, "but I was an experienced pilot before I got hurt, you know. But if you think you could do anything in a mechanical way, there's an automobile school here in Tiflis, and I might do worse than suggest to the hospital authorities that

you be transferred there. You've probably discovered for yourself that there's nothing in this army quite so rare as a good mechanic."

So two days later I left the hospital for good, and was told that I might start my new work within a week.

It was a week which I shall not forget, because I spent almost every waking hour of it wandering up and down Tiflis, and Tiflis is like no other city in the whole Caucasus. It is the capital of Georgia, but it is not Georgian; indeed, the Georgians walk like strangers in many of its streets; nor is it Russian, nor Armenian, nor Tartar, nor Persian—but something of each of them. It is a city of a thousand moods and a thousand characters, a city out of which no memory of mine could possibly make a whole.

There was a bluff above Tiflis, with a kind of rough pleasure garden there, much frequented by the workers and poorer people. From up there the town looks rather like a scattering of semi-precious stones, badly selected stones to be sure, and not all of them beautiful; there's no other way to describe those crude colours in their bare setting. There are the roofs of the Russian barracks, all a dark crimson; while the Armenian quarter, seen thus from above, is all copper green or silver gilt, with the long cartridge-shaped, cross-surmounted steeples of the churches standing up here and there, copper green for the most part, and answering the sunlight with a dull, unholy gleam. But the Greek Orthodox churches have coloured Byzantine domes, like blue unopened tulips, and held

among the houses you can see the trees and walks of a little park; and altogether Tiflis is fantastic to look down upon, with the brown thread of river cutting it in two.

Whatever coherence it may have from above is altogether lost when you get down among its streets, some of which I remember as the most precipitous that I have ever come across. I spent most of my time in the Russian quarter, which prided itself in those days upon the resemblance between its main street, the Golovinsky Prospekt, and the Nevsky Prospekt, St. Petersburg. My knowledge of the Nevsky Prospekt having been acquired from a tattered copy of Gogol's stories, which had somehow found its way into our house at Ekaterinodar, and which I used to spell out to myself without understanding it very well, I was quite convinced that the Golovinsky Prospekt was an excellent imitation of its famous original. There at least were the same romantic young officers, peering under the women's hats—Lieutenant Pirogovs every one; and the parade of smart uniforms and fashionable gowns, for many of the officers had their families with them, the bright cafés, the gentle laughter that ran the length of every summer's afternoon, gave Tiflis all the airs of a summer capital.

I got the best of it that first week, since, to anticipate a little, when I was invited to a doctor's home towards the end of my stay, society gave me a very ungentle welcome. It was afternoon tea, as I remember. The rooms were thronged with officers and beautiful women, all of them very cool to look at, though it was a stifling day. I was ex-

tremely hot in my uniform and extremely uncomfortable, and I had been removed from polite society so long that I must have looked like a fish out of water, gasping for breath. At any rate, I overheard one woman say to the doctor's wife: "Aren't you afraid that she will steal something?"—a remark which sent me out of that house on the instant. I am afraid that I burst into tears when I got outside. I never accepted another invitation, though I got quite a few of them, being something of a curiosity among the army people there.

But the Russian quarter—opera house, theatre, museum, club and all the rest of it—is only one part of Tiflis. You don't have to walk far to discover the native town, which never failed to astonish me whenever I ventured into it. The Persian quarter—all narrow crooked streets, each one given up to a particular business, with an unprepossessing mosque here and there: only the rug dealers' street had any attraction for me, the colours glowing out of those little closet-like shops, crouching deep in the walls. The Georgian quarter—where they sold daggers, and cups, and flagons, and saddle ornaments, and where the smiths had a cunning way of inlaying steel with silver and gold; there were things heaped up in their dark, unventilated little shops that I would have been glad to buy. But I never lingered in the native streets, for I had a feeling that I was out of place there, that the very walls disliked a stranger's shadow on them.

It is difficult to tear myself away from the memories of



Tiflis, which are gathered like an oasis in the middle of my army life: of the river Kars, pouring the swift coffee of its waters through the city, between cliffs of stone walls: of the Botanical Gardens, where I found my way one afternoon, not without labour. It is unusual to find such gardens among the ruins of a citadel, perched some hundreds of feet above the river. But if the place is difficult to reach, it repays one's trouble; for when you have climbed up here, and cooled yourself in a dark, echoing tunnel, you come out into what was once a moat, now strangely converted. They grew tropical plants in places where the sun lay, and northern plants in the shade, and the whole place was heavy with the scent of flowers. There was a little zoo there as well, for I remember a fine lion, though the other animals I have forgotten.

But the automobile school claimed me after a week, which meant leading a more regular life in barracks with my fellow students, who seemed to think it a great joke that I was a girl of sixteen, though they never carried things too far, or bothered me in any way that mattered. I'm not sure that they weren't a little afraid of me, the only one among them with a St. George's Cross; afraid of me, at any rate, to the extent that they had never met a female of my kind before, who lived and worked and looked just like them, and who made no effort to be attractive. Besides which, Tiflis is quite a large city, and there were plenty of outlets for them when they had the money, or even when they hadn't.

We spent three weeks in a classroom, studying the theory of automotive transportation, and another week or two in a garage learning the different parts of a car. Then driving lessons. The blackboard work never meant much to me, but I learned to drive very quickly, and before long I had a car of my own assigned to me—a big Benz, and with it an allowance of petrol for driving practice. The officers had got to know this and often asked us to drive them: indeed my fellow students had come to rely pretty much on the money from the tips they were given, for the automobile school did not seem to consider it necessary to pay us while we studied.

My first “fare” was a very handsome officer, who asked me to take him and his companion for a drive, his companion being too heavily veiled for me to see much of her face, though if it was anything like her figure it was probably pretty enough. At any rate, from the way he said: “Drive away from town—anywhere”—I assumed that the lady was not his wife, though she may well have been somebody else’s from the hurry they were in to get out of Tiflis. So, not to be delayed by the horse and mule traffic in the native quarters, or by some lazy camel flopping in the middle of the streets, I took them up through Grusinski, climbing over narrow hilly roads.

“Where are we being taken?” said the lady at last.

“Where are you taking us?” the officer repeated. I didn’t see any necessity to answer, for a curve in the road had just opened an extraordinary view—range after range of snow-capped mountains, floating in the blue

air, and beneath us the steep green valley of the Kars. "Hold here a while," he ordered; and as I opened the door for them to alight and stood at attention, I couldn't help saying as correctly as you please: "I hope your nobleness does not regret having travelled a short distance on these dirty roads."

He started, and glared at me; but I kept my face so blank and respectful that he gave me no other answer than an ill-tempered grunt. Handsome men are often very stupid, which is nature's way of keeping the books straight, and—perhaps because he respected me for a sarcasm which he could not quite detect, perhaps because he and the lady disappeared for a suspiciously long while, making me a fellow conspirator whether I liked it or not—when I set them down again on the edge of the Russian quarter, he gave me three silver roubles for a tip.

This was two roubles more than was customary, and I was foolish enough to tell my fellow students of my good fortune, with the result that I was forced to hand over the two extra roubles at once. With the other one burning in my pocket, I made straight for a coffee and pastry shop which had often tempted me in the last weeks. I lingered outside, screwing up my courage to go in. What enlisted soldier has not asked himself whether a shop is not one of those "officers only" places? But there was something about the cakes in the window which made any possibility of rebuff seem a little thin. So I found myself inside, asking the lady at the counter, in a hoarse whisper, what was the price of her pastries?

Good, I would take five. Would I eat them there at the table? Heaven may well be a white table in a shop that smells of fresh pastry, with a proprietor who does not discriminate against private soldiers. I sat down. Yes, coffee with cream, please. . . .

When at last I went back to the cashier's desk, the proprietor told me there would be nothing to pay, and wouldn't I have another cup of coffee as his guest? "Thank you," I said, not daring to stretch this marvellous experience too far. "You are very kind, but I have had enough." Then I realized that I had forgotten the tip and, because it seemed altogether too mean a gesture to ask for change, I laid my silver rouble on the table, feeling that my pleasure had been worth so much. But the girl caught me up before I could get back to the door. "You buy something with it," she said and pressed the rouble in my hand.

It was about a week after this that I took a general and his lady for a long drive among the hills; and on our homeward journey in the late afternoon, just as we reached the final steep descent into Tiflis, the general asked me if we had enough petrol.

"Enough to get you to your house, your high nobleness," I answered over my shoulder.

"You go to the devil," said the general, with surprising violence; for he had one of those long, pale, bearded faces of which the least you can say is they look saintly, "I'm not going to my house. Get some petrol, you——"

And a flow of complaints pursued my unyielding back

all the way down the curving, dusty hill until we pulled up at the first garage I could find. Whether it's the heat or your girl, I said to myself as I got out, your high nobleness isn't going to get away with that; so I sent the garage man, a surly Georgian who seemed to be sweating black oil from every pore, to tell my fine general the price of his petrol. The price was a stiff one, for the general cursed the Georgian up and down before he paid; while I preserved what I hope was an air of detachment, and bided my time.

"Why did you let that—swine talk to me?" said the general as I started to pump up the tyres. But I only answered, in the meekest of voices: "Your high nobleness will now ride easily on the——cobble stones," using a perfectly monstrous adjective, the full meaning of which I have happily never learned.

At this piece of impertinence the lady burst into laughter, and the general, after staring at me for a while in stunned surprise, began to apologize for his anger in addressing me. A general apologizing to a private soldier? No, to the order of St. George—and maybe to a girl. It must have been that, for when we stopped at a café, the lady asked me to join them in a glass of Kahetinsky, the Georgian wine which crowns every occasion in Tiflis—an invitation which a male chauffeur could not possibly have received.

So there we were, seated among the early evening crowd of Tiflis, a crowd than which there is none smarter in the whole Caucasus. The Kahetinsky, tasting and

working like natural champagne, established some harmony between us, the laughing crowd, and the green evening outside, so that very soon we were talking together with a good deal of ease, and the general had mellowed enough to ask me for the story of my St. George's crosses.

The last time I told this story had been in the evening too, in the windy dusk under the steep walls, when the Kurds had listened to some of the most romantic adventures I have ever conceived; this time I told the bare truth, but my audience was no less spellbound, and, catching the mood from them, I went on with my history until that incident in the café a week before.

"Good!" said the general's mistress, her elbows on the table, her pretty face cupped in her hands. "I'll take you there to-morrow for tea."

The general laughed. "You'll do nothing of the sort, my dear," he announced, "because she'll be very busy to-morrow. This is my new chauffeur." And he went on to say that the Grand Duke Nicholas and his staff were arriving in Tiflis that night, and going on the next day to Vladikavkaz over the old Georgian military road. "And you shall be the Grand Duke's chauffeur," he concluded, his long face lighting up with an almost childish pleasure, the Kahetinsky having inspired him with this unlikely project.

"Isn't that very irregular, dear?" asked his mistress, a little uncertainly; everybody knew that generals of the Imperial blood are not driven round by private soldiers.

"Well, she shall be the next best thing. I can arrange that." He beamed at me, where I sat beside him, wondering whether to be delighted or dismayed. "I liked the way you managed that steep road to this café," he explained; and when I left him at his house, he presented me with a five rouble gold tip.

One day I shall learn wisdom about money; though I am little wiser now than I was then. At any rate that evening, when I returned to my command, right in the middle of a card game, I was idiot enough to boast about my five roubles, which were promptly taken from me in exchange for a single silver one. Only an order to appear at headquarters—promptly at seven-thirty, ready for a long trip—sent me to bed with any remnant of self-respect.

I reported with my Benz exactly on time, and three young officers got in, ordering me to drive to the general's home. We found him already waiting on the sidewalk. "Viceroy's Palace," he said, smiling at me as though I were some private discovery of his own, or some new kind of mechanical toy with which to please the great commander. So I drove them down the Golovinsky Prospekt, and on past the scarlet uniforms of the Viceroy's Georgian sentries, and up to the white steps of a building which seems perfectly enormous in my memory.

And here I ceased to be a chauffeur and became a sort of staff orderly; that is to say, I had nothing more strenuous to do than to sit stiffly on the front seat, while one of the Grand Duke's own staff took the wheel.

The Grand Duke, coming down those steps, should have been a great occasion, but great occasions have a way of cheating us, and, standing stiffly at attention, I saw little more than a tall man, his beard splashed with silver, dressed in a severe perfection of Cossack uniform. If he left any impression on me, it was one of severity.

But I get a little warmth out of the thought that the great man, the idol of our army, sat behind me for twelve hours along the military road—speaking only in sharp monosyllables, and not often. I have been told since that he rarely said much, but when he spoke it was generally more to the point than his hearers cared for.

My driver had enough to do to keep the Benz on the road which was narrow, badly kept, and filled with sharp curves; not a road for a lazy driver since every curve seemed to conceal a camel caravan, or a herd of sheep; and often enough we were driving along the sheer edge of some of the most unpleasant-looking ravines I have ever seen.

But we drove into Vladikavkaz without mishap and in very good time. Vladikavkaz, too, is almost as anonymous a memory as the Grand Duke. I remember a large hotel, where the manager bowed me into a clean room; I remember getting petrol free from all stations; and parking at headquarters every morning for my orders; and parading two or three times up an insignificant main street with an empty car—just showing off.

On the fifth day we drove back to Tiflis. . . . And I wish that the Grand Duke, whom I never saw again, could be



more substantial in my mind than he is. I have not much with which to recall him. The Grand Duke is nothing but a silvered beard and a perfect Cossack uniform; he is a curt, brief, steely voice behind my back; he is a tall figure getting into a car, he is a scattering of cheers in the street; he is the Viceroy's magnificent scarlet sentries stiffening to attention. These are my few poor relics of the supreme general of our armies.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### FAMINE AND THIRST

It was towards the beginning of autumn, when the term ended, when they talked of getting jobs for us, five or six of us being assigned at a time to whatever positions fell vacant; and it was almost winter before I left Tiflis for Erivan, where I was to join the Red Cross.

There stood a shrine, at the principal gateway of the park in Tiflis, housing a mosaic ikon of the Christ. He wore a long *boorka*, lined with ermine, and a scarlet tunic underneath. His loose blue trousers were tucked into high leather boots. His girdle was green, with a beautifully enamelled dagger thrust into it, and a revolver too, if I am not wrong. He wore silver cartridge cases across His breast, and on His head a tall black hat of Persian lamb's wool. In fact He was an exact image of a Georgian dandy, and very much beloved by the peasants of Tiflis, who did not wish to conceive of their Master as being anything else: you could see a hundred or more of them any day bending down to kiss the glass that covered His feet. To me He was almost a Cossack; certainly I had seen no other image that brought Him so close to my own

people; and so on my last evening at Tiflis I found myself walking down from the barracks to that park gateway, pretending an unconcern which I did not feel.

Under the branches which overhung the shrine twilight had already gathered, and the ikon was drowning in a deep green shade. I looked once over my shoulder; but a soldier by a shrine is nothing new to the inhabitants of Tiflis, who scarcely glanced at me as they strolled past; so I bent down and laid my lips to the glass, and muttered a little prayer to this almost Cossack Christ, trying to keep my tears back as I prayed.

Erivan is Armenian for "at the foot," and its inhabitants are said to swear that you can see the peaks of both Ararats from its principal square at any time of the day. When I arrived in town, the inhabitants were too far gone with starvation to have any care for their mountains, and I think I had already seen enough of Ararat to last me for the rest of my life. Apart from that view, I doubt if the town has anything else to boast of, even in times of prosperity; for it is little better than an unsightly huddle of windowless, one-storied houses, with acres and acres of dirty bazaar and a large square in the middle where the caravans deposit their cargoes. But there were few caravans that winter, for, as I have said, the town was in the grip of famine.

Famine. Of all places in the world for the spending of an idle winter, Erivan was the least to be desired. We had nothing to do there but wait for orders which never came and watch the people die around us. Nor could we help,

having little enough food for ourselves; so in the grey prison that had once been a prosperous town, we lived side by side with the most lingering kind of death that can ever be visited on human beings.

The regular soldiers, who had their barracks in an old Persian fortress, were the lucky ones; for that was a world of their own, set apart from the town, where they lived among the fantastically decorated rooms of what had once been a palace within the fort; a draughty ruin, but unlike anything else in Erivan, and therefore to be coveted. I and my chauffeur companions were billeted in a little bare house, whose eyeless walls fronted the main street; we had a few ragged Turkish cushions for beds, and an ancient stove that had come from God knows where and had acquired all the dirty habits of old age.

This was a minor discomfort, however, compared to the cheerless fact that we were in the middle of the town: that haunted town, that place of quite unspeakable ghosts.

Erivan of 1916, where the meanest garbage disappeared overnight, and the streets were dead with grey faces; where the sacred peak of Ararat peered disdainfully into an empty square, that had once been filled with the traffic of caravans; where every morning fetched its hideous rumours out of the cold bazaar, rumours of cannibalism which I still prefer to disbelieve; where one's own walls were no protection against that whispering famine.

If you have ever lived in a starving town, you will know how the feeling of it creeps into the most private rooms; there is no escaping from it, for it has a soundless

voice, heard in the mind's ear, like the voice of a ghost; night after night I lay awake, listening to it, and praying for the orders to come that might move us southward into Persia.

When we passed through the streets, as the winter grew older, we used to be assaulted by desperate bands of children, more than half naked, their bellies swollen out of all proportion, their legs so thin that you wondered how they could stand upright on them, their lean ribs almost tearing through the stretched skin. They would grab at one's legs, or thrust their horrible little claws into one's pockets, begging for a crust of bread; and the noise they made was like the chattering of small birds, they were so shrill with hunger. Armenians are notorious beggars, not specially to be pitied in the good times; but they were pitiful now, though it would have taken a large heart not to be repelled by some of them.

There were a few Cossacks in the town, not of my regiment, who seemed to think that there was nothing to be wondered at or wept over in a few dying Armenians, for whom they had an ancient contempt. Erivan has a public oven, a large square pit, with a cement bottom, where the bread was baked in normal times, but now it was empty and fireless; and it was here that the women gathered, as though they expected some miracle to kindle a fire out of heaven and provide them with dough to slap against the oven walls. There was no more ghastly sight than these ragged creatures, particularly the mothers with babies at the breast; long, empty breasts bared to the meagre win-



ARMENIAN REFUGEE CHILDREN



ter sunlight. The Cossacks used to swagger past them, yelling: "Dry udders"—a remark which seemed to give them infinite amusement, and which was the reason why I never went over to their quarters for possible news of Kurny and the rest, though I longed to know what had happened to them.

We were not *sanitars* but military chauffeurs, a distinction which did not save us from burying starved corpses in a sort of potter's field outside the town, where the dead were laid out in long trenches. Enough has been written about this sort of thing to save me the necessity of repeating it: one public grave looks very much like another. Nor could I find the heart in me to say any more about Erivan, one town among many for which the most brilliant feats of the late war will never provide an excuse.

When spring was a faint rash of green on the mountain sides, we were ordered into Persia.

From Erivan to Djoulfa, from Djoulfa onwards to Tavis, while the Persian landscape opened itself to the thin invasion of spring. Two or three of my fellow chauffeurs had been in the early operations around Lake Van, and spoke of the strange beauty of Persia; but here we looked for it in vain, and the starvation that had tormented me in Erivan during the winter now reproduced itself along the dead contours of a sterile land. . . .

Because of an accident that was afterwards to happen to me among the Persian mountains, my memory of that journey is almost entirely vanished. A blind town where the bright April sunlight is almost quenched in the black



veils of the women—that must be Tavrís; and beyond that nothing.

Nothing until late July and the black margins of Lake Urmia. Urmia and what followed after it have not erased themselves, and never will. We were taken over in flat ferry boats, across a water that was alive with snakes; a thick, scummy water which bred innumerable winged bugs for them to feed upon. I have always feared snakes above all things, and the sight of these shiny creatures, scarring the water like black whips, and sometimes jumping right up into the air for their food, made me physically sick; especially as the soldiers fished for them and brought a few over the boat side, dangling them in front of my face with: "Won't you have some nice fish?" Those were evil humours, with no good feeling in them.

The farther shore was all black, smelly mud; and beyond it a patch of desert stretching its sunbaked, stony length towards the mountains. We were going to climb up towards Ravanduz, so the rumour went, to drive some Germans out; and that day began one of the worst marches in my memory. It was a march in which I had little share, for I was now provided with a truck, and to drive a jolting truck through the heat is no more than ordinary discomfort; but the infantry suffered abominably.

There were no streams in the mountains, and the parched ravines were filled with heat, as though somebody had stuffed them with damp wool; in some low place you might find a water hole barely covered with a

green layer of stagnant water. The soldiers, desperate with thirst, would break ranks and run towards it, not in the least repelled by the yellow maggots that bred in the scum nor by the cloud of many-coloured flies that hung above it. Off came their boots, off came the rags that bound their feet, and with these rags as filters they would strain off the bitter water, and swallow it as though it were some kind of nectar.

You don't know what thirst is until you have seen men reduced to such straits; and I wondered whether the frost and snow of Ararat had not been preferable to this. And the worst of it all was that we had the means of relieving their torture: large tanks of sweet water, one to each Red Cross truck, but carefully concealed. We were told never to reveal the presence of this water, under pain of severe penalty, since it was carried for the wounded in case of battle; but we ourselves received a daily ration, just enough to keep the extremes of thirst away, and the officers never looked as though they had been deprived of anything.

I used to think to myself, as I watched this army stumbling into the mountains, that the world I lived in had no truth in it. I used to think a lot of that cool shrine by the park gateway in Tiflis, and wondered how these comrades of mine, weak and staggering, fitted in with the mercies of Christian teaching. I was very tempted to call out to them that here was water, here in the truck; I knew that if I did they would stampede us, and be shot down, and that things would be worse then than before.

The army muttered to itself all during that march, till the very air seemed to be heavy with rumours. The Tsar was about to be overthrown—that was the most common, though where it came from no one could ever discover; or that we were being sold to the English, to fight their battles for them without pay; or, most fantastic and yet most credible of all, that the army was being deliberately lost. Already, though we did not know it, the first rumour had actually become fact. . . . As we marched along the top of the Kalihnsky Canyon, little, white, flat-roofed Persian *auls*, clinging to the mountain side, mocked us with an illusion of peace.

But another reality lay just ahead.

In the August of 1917, we went into battle, not knowing that in Moscow and St. Petersburg, now Petrograd, our cause was already lost. As a member of the Red Cross outfit, I played no part in the manœuvres that preceded action. I was well in the rear, thankful that water had been found to relieve the army of its worst necessity, but otherwise indifferent to what was happening or what might come. I had been given a gas mask, since we were now also facing seasoned German veterans; but even the thought of gas left me quite incurious, for I was filled with a sort of languid presentiment that the end was not very far off—whether for me only, or for all of us, I could not tell.

Fighting opened before dawn, with the Russians on one slope and the Germans with some Austrians on another, and a valley lying between them like an open

grave. We had our trucks well up the road until we were not far behind the front lines, and could see most of what was to be seen: an unreal battle as I remember it, hideous with the bursting of gas shells: but a battle so violent that we were soon pressed into doing the work of *sanitars*, carrying the wounded off the slopes and back to our trucks. Dawn made a vile twilight among the heavy clouds of gas, through which we moved like ghosts, with round black windows for eyes, and white spots for faces. My mask seemed to put a screen between me and the world outside, a world through which I moved unhurt all the morning, watching the carnage around me with almost complete indifference. Nobody looked human; even when men fell dead, they fell like animals, with their masked faces turned upwards, and their bodies twisted sideways. Even when they were blown to pieces—and God knows I must have seen it happen a hundred times, those arms and legs and heads scattering up through the murky air—I found nothing wrong in that. Deafened and speechless, I went about my work automatically, staggering back and forth to the stretchers, not even aware of aching arms and shoulders. . . .

By midday, a fresh batch of *sanitars* had been rushed into service and we were free to drive our loaded trucks back to the field hospitals. There was only one road, winding its way over the mountains and we had to wait for hours on our first trip, while fresh men and ammunition poured past us towards the front; it was only a short journey, but it was well into evening before we completed it—

so a little army of engineers was set to building a new road for us, and the wounded waited two days for its completion. Drivers being precious, we were told to keep under cover and not risk ourselves again among the front lines: and there was time for my head to clear before the real work began.

It was hardly a road that they had built us, but a sort of track, a winding of fresh earth into the sheltered hills behind us. We started at night, racing to and fro, with the air so foul all the way that it was dangerous to remove our masks, and no time to be careful for the wounded we were carrying. To and fro, to and fro into the first light of day-break, creeping along the hills: when the enemy at last discovered our private road, the gas shells began to fall upon it, bursting, not with the usual red glare, but with a kind of muddy light, scarcely distinguishable in the beginning day.

I was driving back with an empty truck when this new danger appeared, and I remember the truck in front of me slowing to a halt, and how, when I pulled up and ran over to it, I found the driver lying silent over the wheel. He was stone dead. I shoved him away, untangled his feet from the gears, and took the wheel; shells were bursting up the road ahead of me and because of the noise I could not tell whether the motor was running or not until I let in the clutch. Then I found that the emergency brake had been pulled tight, so that the driver must have remained conscious long enough for that.

I turned his truck off the road and went on. There was

another truck, facing me this time and full of wounded, stalled round the next bend; and the driver was slumped over his wheel as before. It was only then that I realized that gas masks are not always a protection against gas; and with a new cold fear at my heart I turned my own car off the road and began to drive the full one back towards the dressing station, jolting over the ruts, avoiding the new shell holes that had opened up since I had last travelled that way. A shell burst just behind me. . . . Then one some hundred yards ahead. . . . Then one off the road almost in front of me, or so it seems. They had the range now. The road curved around a hill just ahead, with a fair chance of cover behind it. Could I reach that curve in time?

Could I. . . ?

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### INTERLUDE: 1917

AT FIRST I thought I was dreaming—that I had a dream of cool people, moving like a wind, and the wind blowing on me; who by degrees took on the familiar shapes of nurses, but nurses who floated rather than walked; and it seemed that I lay sleeping with my eyes open, but quite unable to move.

I closed my eyes, and with that the scene changed at once.

Men in filthy uniforms, their red eyes glaring through the gas mask holes, running forward—hundreds and hundreds of men; the sky above them was brindled with red and green fires. The way out of that was to open one's eyes, but the violent sky leaned down upon them, and the men disappeared and there was nothing in the world but fire.

I lifted my eyes open with the weight of the world on them, and there was a long room, with the nurses moving to and fro, and a bright puddle of sunlight lay on a bowl of violets on the centre table. It was impossible to tell which was the dream and which the fact. The bed swayed

under me, and the room began to drift into darkness—where, little as I wished it, I had to follow; it was like night coming on, growing out of a far corner by the doorway, swallowing up the farthest white-curtained window, then the middle one, then the sun-lit violets, then the nearest window, then the bed next to me. . . .

How long I remained unconscious I do not know. But the next time I woke up it was morning, and there was a checker of sunlight all over my bed, and just ahead of me sunlight flowed on to a little lawn, like broad water dropping into a pool. There was no sound to be heard. The red wall which enclosed the garden where I lay seemed to have shut all human voices out; for along the pathway beneath it were, so far as I could see without turning my head, some half-dozen beds, and nurses chatting gaily to the patients, but all in dumb show.

Above my head a network of branches stirred their soundless leaves in the wind, turning the undersides towards the sun; and the delicate change between deep green and gold so confused my upturned eyes that I had to close them. And once more the battlefield rushed in upon me, where a garden had been before; with the endless dreadful figures running forward, and the fiery sky; and I knew that I was screaming as my eyes opened again.

A nurse came running over to me, and stood beside me, and smiled as she talked; but I heard nothing. This might still be the dream, and the battlefield the reality; and perhaps I should have remained uncertain about it for a much



longer time, if she had not held a piece of paper before my eyes with this written on it:

### CONCUSSION

and underneath—Nobile Hospital, Baku. I tried to speak, but could not hear my own voice, and there were tears in her eyes as her lips shaped themselves carefully into words I could not understand.

So I was deaf. And though I could see no bandages, nor anything wrong with the shape of my body under the bed-clothes, there was no way of moving it: but it did not hurt me, and I had a feeling that I was not wounded. "I can't hear anything"—my lips moved obediently but there was no sound from them: and, with the idea that perhaps I was thinking aloud, I began to giggle, in a way that seemed to startle the nurse, who looked at me closely and hurried off.

I dared not close my eyes, for fear of what I should discover behind them—that battle, too real to be a dream. Presently the nurse came back with two doctors, and I laughed in their faces—or giggled, rather, out of weakness. But they looked so sad and so pitying, that I grew serious, too; perhaps it was my face that was scarred; and then two nurses brought a stretcher, and lifted me on to it so carefully that I longed to tell them that I could feel nothing, and that they could not hurt me. . . .

The dream returned; and then, though the waking world had no sound for me, my mind was loud with the

crash of gunfire and terrified with the screams of advancing men. Sometimes I would find myself in the garden, sometimes in the ward, sometimes in a room filled with electrical devices; but always the dream returned; and I have no way now of telling what really happened, or how long it was before my hearing began to come back. When that occurred I was happy with the happiness not far from hysteria: having been released from an exile that only a deaf person can understand.

Now I could hear, and was less often troubled with dreams; but I could not speak. I could only make strange sounds, and whenever I wanted anything had to write down my wishes. The paralysis had left my arms, and was slowly creeping away down my body; but when I raised my head, it swung like a pendulum with a peculiar sideways motion altogether beyond my control, and was only still when it lay on the pillow. I remember, but none too clearly, that the days were comparatively cheerful and that the terror began to come only at night.

The hospital at Baku will never come properly to mind, any more than the battle which preceded it: but I remember a day when I lay in the garden and someone told me cautiously about the March Revolution, and how there was no longer a Tsar in Russia.

There was a lazy scented wind in the garden, and a bird singing in the heart of the wind: but for a moment, when whoever it was had finished speaking, the whole day turned cold and pale, enclosing a single bitter thought.

For the first time for many weeks I thought of Kosel. Kosel had died for a cause that did not exist any more, that had been overthrown in a night. . . .

Kosel, and my comrades, and a million others.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### MURDER IN THE HILLS

SEPTEMBER, 1917. I was in a mountain sanatorium a few miles from Baku.

I could walk easily now and suffered no pain, although my speech still remained a convulsive stuttering, and my head still swung like a pendulum whenever it was off the pillow. The doctors assured me that I was "coming back," although they had to admit that I would never be fully restored to health unless I underwent special treatments that were not afforded in that part of the country.

I didn't bother much about that. It was strangely peaceful and quiet up there among the mountains, and nothing, not even the most sinister news, could disturb the gentle sequence of days. I learned a good deal about the new era which was dawning in bitter hatred over the Caucasus, how the different tribes had turned to fighting among themselves, and how, as must always happen, they had started by venting a common rage upon the Armenians: but news of this sort somehow failed to move me.

I think that I was tired out in body and mind; and sit-

ting on the hospital terrace, gazing out over miles and miles of mountain; or staring from an eastward window at the bright levels of the Caspian Sea—I used to think back over my three years of war from which that last experience in the Persian mountains had cut me off entirely, as though a long night lay between, and try wearily to make some sense out of them. Three years of a man's work, of crude experiences and cruder living, do not fit a girl's mind for clear thinking. I could never get beyond some idea that the Tsar had deserted us, he to whom my people had always looked as their only leader under God, and used to ask myself how this man, now suddenly deprived of meaning and dignity, could possibly have been worth the sacrifices he had called for. But my mind only turned languidly round these questions, which as yet scarcely seemed real enough to provide with an answer.

But at last, one morning, the Revolution found its way into our mountain fastness, too; and we were told that the sanatorium was no longer safe, as natives and soldiers were combing the whole district for nobles and officers; and that we must leave at once for Baku.

The next day, when we started, and had gone no more than a mile or two, I had my first sight of Revolution. The first village we came to was a little summer resort, a cluster of white houses on the hillside, where many of the better class families had sought refuge. We were still somewhere above it when we heard thin screams of terror, and the swearing of men, and the voices of women raised

in anger—all easily distinguishable across the clear morning air. And our *kintoshka* drivers (brave talkers, but nothing in a fight) stopped and held a conference in the road.

The upshot of this was that they tried to smuggle us around the village by a sort of cow track, which turned steeply aside through the fields, and led past back yards and barns into the highroad and well out of danger. Or was supposed to lead there. Actually it did what most village tracks are inclined to do; half-way down, it made a sharp right-angle turn, straight into the main square: and since between us and the safe road below there stretched a series of precipitous fields, there was nothing for it but to go ahead.

We arrived in the square almost simultaneously with an ugly-looking mob—soldiers, women, and peasants—which was hustling somebody along in the middle of it, an old gentleman, red-cheeked and white-bearded. Our drivers pulled up somewhat apart from the crowd and from where I stood in the cart I could get a clear view of most of what was going on. There was a certain fascination for me in the way that scene was disposed, a fascination none the less real because of a disgust which accompanied it. Several women, probably relatives, were keeping pace with the leaders, beseeching them to let the old man free, because he was innocent, while the leaders thrust them aside time and time again: and I could not help thinking I had seen it all before in some picture, or in some other life.

As I see it now, the mob has reached the centre of the square, and is exactly framed by the sunlit white walls beyond. The leaders are about half a dozen ragged soldiers, and each one of them has something red on him—a red handkerchief round the head or a red armlet, and one of them is carrying a flag, a woman's red petticoat, no less, tied to a pole. The old man in the middle of them wears a general's uniform, and is bleeding from a little cut just below the eye: he is excited but it is the excitement of anger, not of fear. There are three ladies whose loose hair and disordered clothes perhaps put me in mind of pictures I had seen before: it is impossible for such women, in such circumstances, not to describe, at least for a moment, the formal gestures of tragedy. There is something, if you like, even a little theatrical about the mob of soldiers and peasants which is pressing on behind. . . .

Then everything breaks up, everything begins to happen very rapidly; just as though a picture on one's walls were suddenly to break from the design the painter had given it, and flow into action.

They are forcing the old man into the centre of the square and he is raising his hand for silence. There is an immediate hush, quite automatic, because to the mob a general's uniform is a symbol of authority, and they have still to remember that they are free men.

"Brothers, I am sixty years old. From boyhood I have served our father the Tsar and my country with my whole love and devotion, as have my forefathers. This is my

single fault. I love Russia, I love my people, and I demand that you let me go!"

"*Demand!*" says the gentleman with the flag, a great ugly brute with a coarse mat of red hair. "The swine demands! This is what I do, comrades, to a demanding swine." And he steps forward and spits in the general's face; and the general, whether from astonishment or pride, makes no effort to wipe the spittle away, which drips slowly down his beard. And then others come out from the crowd and do the same thing; one of them an ancient hag, who has looted a bright yellow silk evening gown from somewhere and pulled it on over her clothes, so that the gown has burst all down one side and her dirty grey rags bulge through. She would be very comic, in another setting.

The general suffers this without moving, his arms folded: but one of his ladies, able to bear such insult no longer, falls to her knees and starts begging for mercy; whereupon the red-haired brute drops his flag, seizes a rifle, and knocks her over the head with its butt. She has been killed at once, no doubt of that, because she begins to bleed from the ears.

The general has come to life; he takes a single step towards the red-haired man; and the red-haired man runs him through the belly with a bayonet. There is a screech from the crowd; and the soldiers push forward one by one, and thrust their bayonets into the old man's body, though he may well have died from the first thrust.



Then they turn to the two surviving ladies; and it is curious and horrible that no soldier feels himself of the party unless his bayonet has run the victims through.

And the crowd hides the bodies from me, pressing round them, treading on them as we used to tread on the manure heaps at Raevskaya; and two or three bayonets, swaying above their heads, are a bright crimson against the sunlit walls behind.

As we jolted down the road towards Baku, I told myself, over and over again, that nothing in my whole experience of war could equal a murder like this. And yet, if these soldiers had a thirst for blood, it was the dead general and his kind who had given it them; and if I had just seen a man die miserably, he had probably ordered thousands of men into no less miserable a death. I tried to see the crowd's point of view, because in a sense I was now one of them: but whichever way I looked at it, it seemed that nobody was in the right, that a murder like that condemned both the killer and the killed. And that was the final disillusion.

The doctors at the Nobile hospital told me that they were going to send me to Moscow at the first opportunity; it was only there that cases like mine could be treated. And during the ten days that I stayed there I went down to the city only once and encountered, as was inevitable in those days, a meeting of the Union of Soldiers and Workmen which took place in the public square.

The speeches were delivered with the most startling oratory, but there was no disguising a certain crude sense in them. Boiled down to essentials they would run this way:

"Comrades, they wanted to kill us off:

"They held us inactive on the Caucasian front, so that the Germans could break through on the west.

"They made us march in circles, climbing the highest peaks in the Caucasus, only to freeze to death. That was their way of keeping us busy, pretending that the enemy was always just around the next corner, when there was no enemy.

"When we starved they sent us ammunition; and our comrades on the Western Front were being killed like flies because they had no ammunition."

It didn't matter who it was, shouting from the wooden platform they had set up, for it was always the same story: I stood on the fringes of the crowd, my head shaking like a ridiculous marionette that is being jerked by invisible strings, and I found myself agreeing with some of the speakers: I had once struggled up Ararat in the winter. There was one speaker, among the many soldiers who related the impossible conditions that prevailed at the front, who told a weird story to the effect that the Tsarina, being a German, had sold Russian soldiers to the Germans at ten cents a head; a long, complicated, crazy story during which he worked himself up into a convulsive frenzy. "And for that I was wounded, comrades," he yelled at the end of it, his lips white with froth, "here—and here—and

here"; and he began tearing his clothes off up there on the platform.

And the crowd broke up upon this peroration: "Comrades, do you know who was responsible for all this? It was the work of speculators, profiteers, Jews, and officers! Speculators, profiteers, Jews, and officers!"

At which the mob of soldiers broke into a mad cheering and the shattered plate glass windows of the stores all round the square grinned a jagged, sardonic comment. . . .

They had been looted long ago, whether they belonged to Jews or not.

Those yelling soldiers, and the speakers flinging their arms into the sky, and the sense that no order existed, no responsibility—I had a vague feeling that the end of the world had come, there in Baku. My old nurse used to tell me that according to some prophecy she had heard, the world was due to finish within two thousand years after Christ. And I walked back to hospital, thinking of the end of the world. I believe I was quite happy.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### MICHAEL VERESCHENKO

WE WERE waiting at Baku railroad station, about eight of us, with papers made out for Moscow; it was just before dawn.

The hospital people, overworked and harried as they were, could tell us no more than that a train had been allotted to the Red Cross—which still functioned against all odds—and would leave that day, but when it would leave they could not say. They had told us to go down and wait. . . .

Eight cases of nervous shell shock, waiting in a station that appears to be filled with sleeping soldiers, present rather a hopeless appearance; we had searched for someone in authority, who could tell us what to do next, but there was no authority. The few soldiers who were awake knew precisely nothing, and cared less.

A bell clanged somewhere in the building behind us, and, like dead men that are summoned out of the earth by the archangel's trumpet, the soldiers began to stir, and stretch their arms, and sit up; and suddenly the station came alive with a great din as they pushed forward to-

wards the railroad track. Out of the half darkness crept a one-eyed monster of an engine, pulling a train of crimson freight cars already filled to overflowing as it seemed; into which, by some miracle, at least half of them managed to fight their way.

It waited only a short while before it pulled out.

Dawn began to break on the clamour of disappointed soldiers, and the chugging of the train, as it picked up speed beyond the station.

We had not attempted to move. "That's the tenth," I heard one of the soldiers say as he lay down to sleep again; he seemed more or less resigned.

We waited all through the morning, all through the afternoon. Towards evening the bell clanged again, and another train pulled in. One look at it was enough. It was a passenger train, but so filled with soldiers and peasants that people were even riding on the roofs. . . .

We had had no food all day, not daring to go back to hospital in case our "Red Cross Train" should arrive during our absence; now, hungry and despondent, we did not know what to do. We sat together in a group, saying nothing to one another for we were long past conversation, every one of us twitching in some way or another: a grotesque and perhaps a comic sight.

He was a big, red-haired animal of a man, dressed in the relics of a uniform that might once have seen service on the Western Front. He had been watching us ever since his arrival, with the stupid stare of a peasant who does not

realize when it is kinder to turn away. I had a vague feeling that I had seen him somewhere before: I knew that if he stood staring at us much longer, I should begin to scream.

At last he strolled over to us.

"What's the matter with all of you, huh?"

"Shell shock," somebody muttered.

"Shell shock," he repeated. The words seemed to give him a great deal of pleasure for he smiled at nothing in particular, and began to pick with his forefinger at a set of very irregular and quite unspeakably black teeth.

"Where do you go from here?" he offered at last.

No answer.

This apparent indifference did not seem to perturb him at all. He stood looking at us as though we were something of which he was rather fond—not affectionately, exactly, but like a man who has paid to see the show and is pleased to discover that he is getting his money's worth. Every now and then he spat expertly at a spot just five inches in front of my feet.

How long his strange examination might have gone on I do not know; it was I who broke the silence with: "Haven't you seen enough?"

"Huh?"

"I said, haven't you seen enough?"

"Enough of what?"

"Of us—we are very amusing to look at I daresay; and if I tell you that we hope to get to Moscow sometime

within the next year or two, perhaps you will go away and let us wait in peace."

He burst into a roar of laughter. "The little—is angry. Come on now, tell me your troubles. You never know but what I can help."

There was a gleam in his little red eyes which might be taken for friendliness; and—realizing that it would be better not to turn away any offer of help, however unlikely—I began to tell him something of what had happened to us.

He heard me through in silence; took off his uniform cap, and began to scratch his matting of red hair; searched in the lining of the cap; produced a minute piece of very strong cheese; and offered it to me with a gesture that I am still surprised to remember as being entirely courtly.

It was then, too—while I was nibbling at his cheese with more politeness than pleasure, for a day's hunger can still draw the line at some things—that I remembered where I had seen him before.

"You can be quite easy in your minds," he was saying. "Leave it to me." And with that he walked off.

About midnight, when the third train arrived, overflowing as usual, there was a new commotion somewhere in the middle of it. It seemed as though men, women and children were being dragged out without any ceremony, though the station was too badly lit, and I was too weary, to make anything out very clearly.

"Hi, you shellshocks!"

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BOLSHEVIK SOLDIERS 1918



SOLDIERS - 1918



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BOLSHEVIK SOLDIERS 1918



SOLDIERS AND CIVILIANS TRAVELLING ON TRAIN



gathered some half-dozen ex-soldiers and neatly cleared a whole compartment for us. When we arrived, he was talking to the peasants whom he and his friends had ejected. "You can ride on the roofs if you like," he said, "or you can go to hell. Either way it's all the same to me. But these here"—and he flung a freckled, red-furred hand out towards us—"these—look well at them—these poor trembling fruit of officers' treason and aristocrats' indulgence, these who have been crippled for life while their betters drank and played, these are going"—and his voice became a trumpet—"on to Moscow!"

I had hardly expected such oratory from such a man; and the last time I had seen him . . .

One of my companions was telling me that he could think of four others in the hospital who might be glad of treatments in Moscow; why not take advantage of this piece of luck and get them down to join us?

The redhead was at the moment engaged in hoisting a very thin peasant woman up on to the roof, laughing enormously as he did so. "You can roost up there, little mother," he said, "just as safe as one of your own hens." I plucked at his sleeve, and told him that I had four comrades in the Nobile Hospital if only he could get the train to wait. At which he clapped me on the shoulder, and strode off towards the engine, where he delivered a moving harangue to the train men—in which it appeared, once more, and with such conviction that I almost believed it myself, that we were all crippled for life.

And the train waited for an hour.

So there we were, the twelve of us and the redhead, crowded on the wooden seat of a fourth class car, pulling out of Baku's station.

"I think I've seen you before," I said to our protector.

"Where was that, sonny?"

"You were carrying a pole, with a red petticoat on it, and you were killing an old general. It was in the hills above Baku."

He seemed to be delighted. "True enough," he said, crashing a great fist down on his knee. "That was a good show. But it's nothing to what I'm going to do to my *feldfebel* (sergeant). I have a special ceremony worked out for that——, when I get back to training camp."

"Is that where you're going?"

"I don't know," he answered vaguely. "Maybe I'll see you shellshocks through to Moscow first. After all, there are plenty of comrades left to look after that *feldfebel*. Yes, I think I'll see you through to Moscow; that's where everybody seems to be going, anyway. We have the trains now, so why not take a ride?"

No, it was very odd, but you couldn't help liking him.

The railroad, it appeared, was entirely disorganized. Soldiers had seized all the trains, and were riding about the country with no apparent destination. So we pulled up at every little station and every siding all through the night; one had a feeling, probably correct, that there was a train just ahead of us and a train not far behind; and I was in a state of terror, lest we should bump into one or be

bumped into by the other, or be sandwiched between them.

Add to this the question of food. We had none, nor any money to buy it with. So off I went to find the redhead, who had drifted a way farther up the train, and whom I discovered at last, drinking vodka and telling stories in another compartment.

"Food?" he said. "Leave that to me, sonny, leave that to me."

And sure enough, at the next stopping place, which happened to be a large-sized station, he appeared in our compartment. There was a large bulge under his tunic, which he unbuttoned with some pride to display a roasted goose, nestling comfortably against the great red bush of his chest.

"Not a word," he said, laying a finger on his lips. "Eat it while it's here and be quick about it. Those——comrades of ours would steal their mother's last crust of bread, so don't let them see this fellow." And he patted the goose, and handed it to me.

"We have no money," I ventured.

"Money!" he shouted. "Pay nothing! All the food in Russia belongs to the soldiers and the strongest, and I am both."

He used to spend a good deal of time in our compartment as we travelled slowly up through the Caucasus; he was usually half drunk and very communicative. He told us that his name was Michael Vereschenko, that he lived in a village in the province of Kharkov; that his mother

had just died—at which news he surprised us by bursting into noisy tears; that his father had died not long before he left for the Galician front in 1915.

But Michael was no fool. There was little to be hoped if he were ever turned loose on society as one of its leaders; but in his way he had a very keen mind, and with a little education to back him he might have been successful. He had spotted me for a girl, so he told me, the first moment in the station at Baku and had said nothing about it: and for all my seventeen years I was still slim enough to be taken for a boy.

“With things the way they are,” he explained, “there’s no safety for a girl in Russia any longer. We used to have more respect for women than any nation under the sun. But now that’s all gone,” he added rather illogically, “we’re all free and equal, and a good thing, too. So I’d keep it dark if I were you. Why, if you’d seen the things done to women lately that I have. . . .”

But the stories that followed could hardly go into print.

We were travelling into the northern Caucasus. Once again, after three long years, the gentle hills of my own land. And yet I felt like a stranger; I had no sense of homecoming.

I was sick and dismayed when, one lazy afternoon, I stood on the very station from which I had started out three years ago—Marina Yurlova, riding among the women to get as near the war as she could.

Five or six miles, no more. I could be there before nightfall. I could sleep in my own room that very night.

I could see my mother. But I put it off. I will get cured at Moscow first, I said to myself, I won't let my mother see me with this swinging head. It has taken me all these years to be honest with myself and say that nothing in the world would have induced me to venture into the utter strangeness of my own home.

That is a very terrible memory, and I am going to pass it over: surely there can be no meaning in it for anybody but me.

Two days later, two officers were discovered on the train, disguised as common soldiers. I believe the reason for their discovery was that someone had seen a pair of hairbrushes among their kit; and it may be that they were not officers at all. But this was an occasion for Michael Vereschenko.

He came into our compartment to tell us what had happened. "Now watch," he said, "and you will see a fine ceremony. I've arranged that these two shall die in the right way; there are no half-measures with my father's son about. Put your poor head out of the window, sonny," he told me, "and keep it there; and you shall see what you shall see."

I was fool enough to do what he told me. About a mile ahead of us the railroad passed over a rocky gorge, where a river flowed in a broken torrent some hundred feet below. As we drew near it, the train began to slow up; and we were midway across the bridge when two figures hurtled out of a compartment towards the front of the train and crashed down on to the rocks below. . . .



Like the rest of my companions, I was supposed to be cured of everything but the nervous swinging of my head. Otherwise I should never have been allowed on a train.

And, after the things I had seen elsewhere, there was nothing overwhelming in the sight of two bodies falling like dolls that a child has thrown away in a fit of anger.

But when I drew in my head again, the old vision of a battlefield was shaping itself before my eyes, and the thudding of the car wheels sounded in my ears like the thunder of guns, and I began to weep violently, screaming and choking as I wept.

And Michael Vereschenko, returning in triumph, found that his "ceremony" had had quite a different effect on me from what he had expected.

He was very concerned. "Why, she's only a girl," he said, over and over again, "only a kid. It would take a lazy good-for-nothing like me to upset a kid. Buck up, comrade, I won't upset you again."

But the hysteria grew worse all that long journey to Moscow. Little fragments of scenery interposed themselves in the nightmare that I suffered: a long plain, empty up to the horizon's far, planetary curve; the dark, menacing presence of a forest at evening, peering in through the window; a heavy moon which seemed to fall through the sky like a plummet. And Michael Vereschenko, bringing me food, holding me on his great chest when I screamed, the back of his hand covered with coarse red hair, patting me on the knee.

Moscow station is a confusion of echoes, crowding

under the great roof, more real than the mass of people who made them.

Moscow streets are something from which Michael protected me, walking me to the hospital, my hand held tight under his arm. I remember him cursing an attendant at the hospital door, and saying good-bye to me, and turning abruptly away with the tears running between the red stubble on his cheeks.

My eleven companions on that journey I have forgotten: but Michael Vereschenko, you redheaded bully and murderer, you lazy, drunken good-for-nothing, I should like to meet you again, if only to tell you that you are a fine man.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

### REVOLUTION: 1918

I SPENT nearly a year in the hospital in Moscow, and yet I remember nothing more of that year than the final month of it. I have been told since that shell shock will do that sort of violence to one's memory; but I have never become reconciled to missing what should have been the greatest experience of my life. Moscow of 1918 has written itself into history: but to me it is only a darkness.

My last weeks there emerge from the darkness and flow reluctantly into a dismal room. My first recollection is that my head was swinging worse than ever and that until the electrical treatments they gave me three times a day began to "take," I found it difficult to walk even the length of the ward without becoming tired. But in my three or four weeks of real consciousness I came to know the geography of that ward pretty well: and so I have to admit that the ultimate fate of Bolshevism, which was still shaping itself in Moscow during that time, measures its approach in my mind in terms of dirt.

Yes, there was nothing more heroic to it than that. Day by day, in that long grey room where daylight itself was

only admitted with reluctance, the dirt became more and more pronounced. Dust on the floor, dust piling thick and soft under the beds; a sticky grime on the dull window-panes; a black grit hanging to the curtains—and on the beds themselves a general murk that turned perceptibly darker and darker.

Perhaps there were as many as twenty beds in that ward; and that is how I became acquainted with the separate growth of twenty different kinds of dirt. In a hut, or a dug-out, it is different; there you are startled by that violent, and in the end endurable thing called filth: it is so very obvious that you become used to it, so outrageous that you begin to see it as a part of war, and therefore to be separated from the ordinary facts of existence. But here, in the Moscow hospital, I really learned the true meaning of dirt, which is a sad and lifeless thing, and therefore altogether disgusting.

The fact is that there were no ward servants and far too few nurses, so that attention was only paid to the serious cases, and the rest were left, like the room in which they lived, to look after themselves. That is how I learned that human beings have one individuality that is at once lower and more surprising than the rest: for while the bed on my left seemed daily to acquire a more and more sombre grey on its linen, the bed on my right turned quite definitely and distinctly blue; and, if I could use paints instead of words, I could describe with accuracy the various shades of darkness into which each separate bed descended as the days wore on. It appeared that a change of

linen had been served out not long before I began to remember things and that it was made to last until I left.

As for the human beings who shared this room with me, I believe they could have managed very well by themselves outside—where, indeed, they spent most of their waking hours. Not a few of them wore soiled bandages around their heads or their legs; and as these bandages were never changed, so far as I could make out, and as they did not seem to suffer in consequence, I suspect that they found the hospital a convenient place for sleeping in, and that the hospital was quite indifferent to their presence.

Towards evening the ward began to fill with them, and with the smell of some tobacco which they smoked—at once less crude and more offensive than *mahorka*—and with a clamour of political conversation, in which it appeared that no two of them shared the same opinion or belonged to the same party. The three weeks I remember in that hospital may well have been exciting weeks so far as the outside world was concerned; all I heard was the broken echoes of them as they came from the mouths of these people.

*These people*; I should be ashamed that I can give them no names, nor fit them with separate identities. And yet they stay with me only as some moving and speaking part of the general grey atmosphere—as though the gathering dust itself pronounced and quarrelled over the names of Kerensky, Kornilov, Deniken, Kaledin, and (particularly during the last week) of Lenin and Trotsky.

Indeed, they are best remembered—and whether such remembrance is a reflection upon them or upon me, I cannot tell—as a series of tumbled beds upon which a different shade of dirt was sadly and gradually and inevitably printed.

And so to Semyon, the single individual among all this nonentity. Whatever may have occurred in the general management of the hospital, the few doctors there were still busy. But they were busy only with the cases which interested them—of which mine was one. And so every day—at nine o'clock, at one o'clock, and at three o'clock precisely—Semyon would summon me for my electrical treatment.

You couldn't escape from the impression that he had once been major domo in an aristocratic household: he moved with such an utter absence of sound, and stared at the world from such very arrogant eyes, as though he were about to order it around to the tradesmen's entrance. He was of medium height, and almost shockingly thin, except for a round, small, unyielding belly; he was always carefully shaved, always clean; he managed to impress an effect of expensive livery upon a pair of incredible, patched blue trousers and a coarse grey shirt; and his boots, which had long since parted between the soles and the uppers, were always beautifully polished.

How he got into the hospital, and how he stayed there, I never had the courage to inquire. Since he behaved as though there had never been such a thing as a revolution, his political opinions were no doubt as reactionary as his

manner. But nobody seemed to bother him on that score; he passed through our midst with a sublime indifference, and though one or two of my anonymous companions may have flung a joke at his back, it never went further than that.

"Kolesnikova!"—Semyon's thin harsh voice, which rang like a cracked front doorbell of a great mansion, summoned me three times a day. I would get up out of my bed and walk the length of the ward, to where he stood waiting for me. Not a sign of interest disturbed that correct countenance. "Your electrical treatment"—and off he would march, leading me soundlessly down the stairway, showing me nothing but a straight, unassailable back, making no comment upon life, except that his thin, doll-like hands trembled ever so slightly and without ceasing.

Semyon—who never once asked me how I was, or looked at me without a haughty condescension; Semyon, who surely never had enough to eat; Semyon, whose clothes came daily nearer to falling apart, but who always conveyed an impression of extreme grandeur; Semyon, whom the Revolution has certainly extinguished by now, since revolutions have no use for that sort of fidelity, that beautiful and unreasonable arrogance—Semyon remains, for so long as I live, as my last sight of Imperial Russia, unshaken, unshakeable, intact.

Towards the beginning of September, 1918, we were told to move—those few of us, that is, who seemed to be

legitimate patients. The hospital was being evacuated to Kazan on the Volga, where the air was healthy; and so—the majority of my companions having disappeared, like something that has been swept out with a broom, to drift into whatever settling place Moscow afforded them—a small company of us set out, one grey dawn, through the streets to the railroad station.

It was then that I first discovered how much I must have missed. Large official buildings offered their charred skeletons to the early daylight, silent and desolate witnesses to the overthrow of order; sometimes a great, coloured banner added the last insult to this death of theirs, its slogan of “Glory to the Workers and Soldiers” bellying contemptuously in the first breath of morning. The streets were worse than deserted—every dark entrance seemed to be haunted with some slinking figure, which crept back into the shadows as we came past; two or three times a band of ragged soldiers seemed to be on the point of stopping us; and once or twice we had to step round a dead body, sprawled across the street.

Morning was struggling into the dark station as we arrived. It was quite clear that a fight had taken place there, probably the night before, for the concours was littered with dead bodies, which had each and every one been stripped of its clothing. And indeed we had scarcely won to the comparative safety inside, when machine guns opened fire on the building. And up started the railroad men, yellow, ragged, unhuman creatures, and ran to the windows to repel this attack. They had appeared at the



first sound of firing, and seemed to answer their commands like soldiers; the rags that fluttered on them may once have been uniforms. They had been starved out of all semblance of an army, they were gaunt and lifeless, and yet somehow you knew they would defend their possession of that station until they dropped.

And these, so one of our guards informed us, were members of the "Red Guard" of Russia, who were putting Lenin and Trotsky into power at Petrograd. These were to overcome an army of the best regulars, officered by the finest men of the Tsar's old regime. Truth is revealed to us by ugly and crooked ways; it is not Michael Vereschenko, or the Soldiers' and Workers' Union at Baku, but these yellow ghosts that I think of as my first sight of the great Revolution.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### PRISON IN KAZAN

WE MIGHT have expected a dangerous journey to Kazan; but, as it happened, it was slow and uneventful. The train left Moscow without hindrance, not long after the ragged and indecisive skirmish had died away, and the only thing that worried us was the train-men's reiterated complaint that they did not know in whose hands they would find the next station.

But after we had pulled into a dozen stations, our hearts in our mouths, not knowing what to expect; and after each of these stations had proved to be no more dangerous than the last, we decided that we would let the train-men do the worrying. And indeed that journey was entirely tedious until we arrived at the final junction before Kazan, where we were delayed forty hours, because the Bolsheviks had captured the town, and would not let us proceed until they were quite certain that we were invalids and not enemies.

We were examined in an empty little wooden building, every pane of its two little windows smashed in; it was getting on towards midnight. A deep wind, creeping in

through the vacant windows, had set the oil lamps swinging and creaking above our heads. Our discharge papers were in order, our infirmities all too obvious, and the examination proceeded in an undertone, while the swaying lamplight chased our heavy shadows about the room, and somebody outside whistled cheerlessly and without ceasing. Our examiners, as I remember them now, seemed little more substantial than the shadows themselves. After that was over, we sat in the train and waited. . . .

The hospital at Kazan was in charge of an old lady, who was neither doctor nor nurse and who seemed to belong to the middle classes. Just how she came to hold a responsible position in a revolutionary town I could never guess, nor did she say anything to enlighten me. She was kind to me from the very start; and I think it was the second day after my arrival that she invited me to take supper in her room.

She is very real to me, that old lady, because she is so entirely, so wildly incredible in such a setting. I can hear her now, presiding over her almost tearfully respectable table—white cloth, very ancient and bravely patched, clean knives and forks, coarse white china plates, and a handsome cracked porcelain bowl filled with late autumn flowers. Her hands moved correctly over her food, each calculated gesture an enormous defiance of the disorderly world outside her four walls; her abundant bosom decently disposed in a stiff corset under the faded purple watered silk of her gown—from which bosom a gold and

unmistakeably correct watch hung from a thin gold chain, the chain beginning in a pair of extremely ornamental, unlikelike, gold butterfly wings.

Her room is less a room than an asylum: all sorts of pieces of furniture have fled there for refuge, and present at once a defiant and complacent appearance, as though they had been moved from their former homes in somewhat of a hurry, and not quite sure whether to be outraged or relieved. I remember a large, black horsehair sofa upon whose shiny lap nobody could have sat with any comfort for a long time, and crammed side by side with it against the wall, for there was none too much space in the room, a red plush armchair, cheerfully hollowed before the onslaught of a generation of sitters, and wearing a woollen antimacassar with the air of an old lady who has been ravished after a siege and has found the experience not unwelcome.

Also, above the heads of these two ancient pieces, a large wooden bracket nailed against the stained wallpaper (upon which wallpaper a number of unlikely blue peacocks gazed dismally at an equal number of faded but clearly indigestible fruits): and on the bracket a not quite moth-eaten stuffed pheasant with a pair of malignant glass eyes. I will not enumerate the mirrors, the landscape pictures, the chairs, side-tables, footstools and bric-à-brac, which have been ushered into this room; it may well be the last temple of bourgeois faith in Kazan, and the lady herself the incorruptible last priestess.

She looks at me through a pair of calm, brown eyes and

talks for half the meal about the weather, having acquired through long years a variety of approaches to that subject. Then, relaxing a little, she asks me about myself; though I give her only the barest details, feeling she might not care for more. Then she says:

"Now tell me about Moscow."

I explain that I have been in a hospital all the time and cannot tell her anything at first hand; she politely conceals an extreme distaste for what news I have; for a moment I believe my description of the wrecked streets will upset even her monumental composure. But when I have finished, she shakes her head slowly from side to side, and her only comment is:

"T'ck, t'ck."

In the bed next to mine there lay a handsome boy of some twenty years old; I had never seen a healthier face than his or clearer grey eyes. He had crisp, black curling hair and a brilliant smile and even white teeth. But I cannot describe him, really, because there is always something which stops me. . . .

I didn't notice it at first. But gradually it dawned on me that nothing of him moved but his head; his head and his eyes followed me as I moved about before his bed, with a slow but invincible motion, thus painfully and proudly declaring their ability to move. And then, observing with some curiosity the entire and shapeless silence of the rest of him, I realized in one horrid instant that he had neither arms nor legs.

I found it difficult to be cheerful in front of him, and towards the end of the week I fell into a sort of melancholy, a piece of selfishness for which I have not yet forgiven myself. He had done his best to cheer me up, for he was always laughing and telling jokes; but the mere difference between his behaviour and his body was too much for me to overcome, and the more I looked at his handsome face the more I sank into despair—not only for him but for myself.

He showed a great deal of concern over my condition, and at last, seeing that I was only getting worse and perhaps not able to bear it himself, he said:

“Look at me! My heels itch so badly that I would like very much to scratch them, but the joke is, I have no hands to scratch with and no heels to scratch.”

He made this remark with an air at once comic and deeply serious, and it was this remark which brought me back to some kind of sense again. I saw at last that if he could bear his mutilation in this way, I had no right to do the despairing for him. And so I took new courage, and for the rest of the time I spent in that hospital we talked very cheerfully together; though what we talked about (except that I learned from him that he could have been transferred to the Caucasian front but had not wanted to leave his friends—“Otherwise, I’d still have my hands and feet, I guess”) I have quite forgotten, for the memory of that beautiful face and that lopped body has extinguished all the rest.

Not that I was destined to spend any long time in hos-

pital. The Bolsheviks, who controlled Kazan, had lists posted in the wards of all soldiers who seemed fit enough to train for the New Army. I was a little surprised, and more frightened, to discover that I had been listed to appear with ten others the next morning at the Commissariat. I did not see how a person with a ludicrously swinging head and ragged nerves could possibly be of any use to any army: but there was nothing for it but to obey.

So the next morning we found our way out to Kazan's insignificant university, to a little building on the edge of the grounds, where a number of old soldiers were standing about and with them a mass of students, their rifles slung over their shoulders.

And the odd thing was that quite a few of these students were Jews—in old Russia a Jew with a rifle was something almost unheard of. They were aggressive Jews, at that: we had scarcely arrived, and were doing our best not to be conspicuous, when one of them asked, in a high, excitable voice, to what party we belonged.

He was one of those small men whom Providence has endowed with a terrifying self-confidence. He simply could not believe us when we told him the plain truth—that we were invalids of the Great War, who had no sides to take. That, he declared, was an “inexcusable position”; his little dark, chinless face, which looked very like a half-grown eagle's, puffing in pompous indignation. And so, whether we liked it or not, we were drawn into an argument, during which one of our group declared that we

were true soldiers who believed in fighting to a victorious end and who did not leave the front to meddle in politics.

At this our Jewish antagonist could scarcely contain himself for rage.

"Let's have it straight," he screamed, while his friends gathered more closely around us. "Whom do you stand for? What government do you believe in?" And most of us, for lack of a better answer, somewhat lamely confessed that we believed in any government that protected our Mother Russia and stood for her honour. A plain statement of this kind is, of course, not the best way to appease a parcel of revolutionary students, who speak only in words of ten syllables when they talk of political belief; and who were, on this occasion, more or less divided in opinion as to whether we were merely stupid or whether we were trying to be funny at their expense.

While the argument still hung in this state of indecision, and the students were still filling the air with important words, my thoughts had wandered off to more immediate affairs—such as, would they let us stay on in hospital, or pack us off to some miserable barracks? And I came to with a start to find someone plucking at my sleeve. It was the eagle-faced Jew.

"What do you believe in?"

"I . . . I——"

"A Cossack—a Jew-killer! In the Tsar's name the Cossacks terrorized the peasants and workers! We don't need to hear from you!"

"Brothers"—I think I had in mind some such appeal



as: "Brothers, I fought with you and for you since the first year of the war, for the love of country and religion." But I never got beyond the first word. It had scarcely left my lips when from weakness or nervous excitement or both, I fainted clean away.

A square of grey wall, streaked with damp. . . .

An atmosphere that was at once thick and chilly, in which it was difficult either to breathe or to stop shivering. A pile of dirty, wet straw under me; and round me, where the straw ended and the floor began, an expanse of what looked like thin black mud.

I had opened my eyes and was staring round me, my head swinging like a pendulum, and each swing reverberating through my body with a dull, sick thud. This was a prison cell, no doubt of that; it was like all the prison cells I had ever read of, built into one. I was lying on a pile of straw along one wall of a filthy, square, grey box in which—considering the general colour and smell—daylight must once have died and left its unappetizing corpse behind.

I raised myself on to one elbow and examined the place with a sort of dull horror. Just above my head a plank was suspended from the wall by a rusty chain, and secured with a padlock; the bottom end of it being hinged to the wall so that, when the chain was paid out, it would serve for a bed. In the opposite corner rose a squat, brick, oven-shaped affair, with a heavy cement top, from whose iron ring a rope climbed up to a pulley in the ceiling. Behind

me, the third wall was unpleasantly fringed with rotting green mould; while the fourth wall, at the farther end, gaped with a grimly barred door.

I must have fainted away again after making this first acquaintance with my prison; for when I awoke the second time, it was pitch dark. I was sitting bolt upright. Just outside my cell there sounded an ominous clanking of keys. A door opened and a patch of light shuddered through some iron bars; then another door; and the thought that I was thus doubly locked in sent me cowering back on to my straw again.

The second door having creaked open, there entered a paraffin lamp, whose dismal light served to conceal everything but the outlines of the figure behind it and a patch of chalky white face above. The lamp descended to the floor, and I perceived that my jailer was a short, untidy soldier who was carrying, with rather improbable care, considering the nature of his errand, two small wooden bowls, one of which was steaming.

One hand was carrying one of the bowls and the lamp, for I noticed, as the lamp descended, a very dirty thumb hooked through its handle and continuing down into the bowl, where it was being washed by what might be intended for drinking water. After performing the complicated manœuvre of separating bowl and lamp, and setting both bowls on the floor, the figure straightened itself and uttered, in a perfectly toneless voice, the two words: "Get up."

I got up.

My jailer then took a small, square object from under his arm, placed it beside the rest of the feast, walked over to the plank, unlocked the chain, and let the plank slowly down until it was about a foot from the floor. My bed for the night. He then stepped carefully away, locked both the doors behind him, and I heard his keys clanking off into the darkness beyond.

One bowl contained boiled sauerkraut, boiled potato peelings, and gave out a perfectly revolting smell. Stirring this mess round with a listless forefinger, I discovered that potato sprouts were clinging to the peelings, but these had been boiled away into the likeness of grey worms, while the peelings themselves were crusted with dirt. The only thing you could say for this supper was that it was thoroughly cooked. The other bowl, as I had guessed, contained drinking water; though it might possibly have been washing water. In any case it was so rank with the smell of paraffin that it was scarcely suited for either purpose. The square object was a piece of ancient black bread.

I sat back on my "bed" and considered what I should do next; eating was out of the question, but I wondered whether or not I should pile some straw on the plank. I pondered this question—turning it round and round in my mind with a sort of slow motion thinking, the effect of chill and headache—and my eyes fell on the rope in the corner.

The little paraffin lamp, which had hitherto offered me some minor consolation, now served to increase my

wretchedness, for its rays were easily swallowed up in the darkness under my ceiling, and illuminated only the lower half of the rope, which seemed to shake and quiver in the uncertain light, as it climbed upwards into shadow. And did they, I asked myself in terror, hang their prisoners by that rope?

I lay back on my plank, shuddering with cold and fear; and presently began to whirl away into a sort of delirium, of which I remember distinctly Kosel's bloody face peering out at me from between the lilac bushes at Raevskaya; and then Basil, grown immensely tall, marching to and fro before my window.

Soldiers' feet in the corridor.

"All's well."

"Number fifty-four?"

"Here!"

My lamp had gone out.

There was the sound of a key turning in the second door; the iron bars crept out of the darkness for a brief moment, and I realized that somebody was staring at me, with a lamp held over his head.

Then darkness shuffled back, a key turned, the footsteps retreated, the silence turned once in my brain, and settled heavily.

Again before morning I awoke to the noise of soldiers marching outside the prison walls and, sitting up in my bed until my eyes were more accustomed to the darkness, I made out a little barred grill, high on the opposite wall,

which I don't remember having noticed before, and which I now tried to reach by climbing up on top of the oven-like affair where the rope was fixed. But the grill was too high. All I had for my pains was a scraped shin and the sight of a black slab of night in the middle of which there hung a remote and lonely star. The soldiers seemed to have crossed the prison yard, and I heard the sharp command to halt.

Silence.

Then the crash of a volley; and the echo like an immensely swift flight of pigeons across the yard. And the firing squad returning.

It happened again two or three times: the last time there was a great commotion outside of my own corridor. They were calling a roll: "Fifty—fifty-one—fifty-two—fifty-three"—I was sitting up on my plank, my knuckles pressed hard against my teeth. Not *fifty-four*, I was saying in a whisper, not *fifty-four*. *Oh God, don't let me be shot!*" "Forty-eight—forty-seven—forty-three." And somebody crying for mercy; and the heavy feet marching away; and feet in the yard—*crash*.

It was well into the morning before my door opened again. This time my jailer carried a steaming bucket, which he set down exactly in the middle of the floor. He carried my dead lamp out of the cell, also my untouched food—upon which he offered no comment—chained up my bed, and began to stir the contents of his bucket with a big wooden spoon. He then conjured another small wooden bowl from his uniform, laid some of the mess



AN EXECUTION IN KAZAN



into it with remorseless care, and left as he had entered, without a word, locking both doors.

I curled up on my heap of straw and began to cry.

A little later an extremely ragged and more than filthy creature came in with another bucket. He, too, seemed to have taken a vow of silence; nor did he look to the right hand or to the left, but went straight over to the oven, lifted off its cement lid, and began to haul on the rope. An all too familiar smell told me what was inside, and I was not particularly surprised when, after some protestation from the rope, yet another bucket appeared, precisely similar to that in which my food had arrived that morning. I remember wondering if they sometimes got the two buckets mixed. . . . Also a great sense of relief. Up to this moment I had preserved, with perhaps unnecessary care and great difficulty, what are known as the decencies of life.

My head had cleared a little, and the chill seemed to be leaving me; I was beginning to feel almost bored. So to kill time, I tried to decipher the inscriptions scrawled all over the walls of my prison, but they were all quite unreadable. Except one. Its author, it seemed, had expressed himself in blood, but with the words: "I die for . . ." his invention appeared to have given out, or his blood.

Or his life.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

### FLIGHT

THE morning wrote itself dimly upon the grey walls of my cell; the afternoon wore on. No more visits: no sound. "The whole place is deserted," I thought, "not a living soul in the cells, nor in the offices, nor in the courtyard." Only a distant confusion from the town, like something beating faintly upon the rind of silence which enclosed me. "Everybody is dead here, but me."

And then, perhaps it was two o'clock, there came the crash of heavy guns, far away; and all day long, while the little square of sky within my grilled window turned from blue to gold, and from gold to grey dust, and through the short evening, until the black night glued itself once again against my window, that bombardment increased in fury.

I lay among the straw, unable to rise; for the chill had come on again, and every time I raised my swinging head it fell back, racking me with pain. So I lay, and listened while the bombardment woke the courtyard with its echoes, and muffled voices down the corridor told me that there were still prisoners in the farther cells. There was no way to count the hours, for the thunder of guns

marched across the night like an endless parade, treading away all sense of time: only, when at length it died away, and the last echo had followed it beyond the world's edge, a little stirring of light in my cell announced that it was almost morning.

And the day advanced with the crackle of rifle fire, as hungry as the hunger inside me; and by midday the fire was close and concentrated. And then just a few shots beyond the courtyard. And a single bullet, chipping the wall outside my cell. And feet in the corridor. . . .

When they fumbled with the locks upon my outer door, when the key turned with a groan in the inner door, when the inner door creaked open, they might have been anybody. So what they saw was a figure crouched among the dirty straw, its head buried in its hands.

"Who are you there in the corner?"

That very careful accent belonged to no Russian; so Maria Kolesnikova raised her head, which swung in the most ludicrous fashion, with a wisp of straw in its hair, before two of the neatest uniforms she had seen in a long while.

"I am a Cossack," I answered, in a very small voice.

"And your home?"—the first uniform spoke as if it were spelling some foreign sentence from a grammar book.

"My home is in Caucasia," I said.

"How did you come here?"

"I do not know," I replied, falling unconsciously into the grammar book manner.

"You shall get up," said the second uniform, with less precision.

I got up.

"Follow."

And the sunlight at the end of a long corridor, the sunlight of three o'clock in September, already gentled with evening. I stood in the courtyard, shivering a little, my eyes half blinded. For a prison cell is like a magic box; when you unlock it, you unlock also the daylight, and the free air, and colour, and the smell of life.

Near me stood a group of ragged, careworn men and women: the men unshaven, the women dirty and dishevelled. Why such long faces, I thought, when you are in the world again?

Our captors were Czecho-Slovaks, it appeared, themselves released prisoners of war, who once had been glad to fight against Austria, and had now broken their homeward journey to join forces with the White troops. Now they had driven the Bolsheviki from Kazan. They were our friends, no doubt of that; their trim officer had advanced to the centre of the yard, and was talking to us in broken Russian. "Where do you want to go?" he said. "You may go where you wish." The barred courtyard gate was already filled with the faces of townsfolk who were laughing and crying and stretching their hand, through: and without so much as a word of thanks my dreary fellow prisoners ran towards them; and the courtyard was empty except for me and my rescuers.

"Will you go with us?" said one of the two soldiers who had released me.

I nodded, and followed them out.

Where they might be taking me I neither knew nor cared. Kazan was like a little country town, settling peacefully into evening, the shadows already curled in its tree-tops, the hard lines of its ancient buildings already blurred with twilight. Behind me was a single slender spire, pointed with sunlight, and far across the town, sunlight was caught among the green roofs of a monastery; below, a mist crept from the Volga and across the flat lands beyond. No sign of war. A few carts creaked in the streets. Soon they would be settling down to sleep.

We halted in the town square, where a certain Captain Kappel, whose name was afterwards to become famous for what he did in Siberia, told us that our job would be to guard the arsenal and ammunition factory, on the Volga banks, just beyond Kazan. So this was war again, but in so peaceful a setting, and so softened by my new feeling of freedom, that I could scarcely believe in it. We were marched to a military building, and there given our evening meal—good soup, in a clean army bucket, served to us by an elderly Russian, whose rags had been dignified by a new leather jacket and English boots. Having eaten nothing in two days, and swallowing too rapidly now, I began to feel very ill, and was scarcely able to keep pace when they marched off again—this time to a sort of supply store, where I was served with a *shinel* (an army overcoat), a pistol, and a rifle; and from there through the

gathering darkness to a barracks, empty except for a long table.

I threw myself on the floor, fighting off my sickness. What use did they think I was going to be? What could I make of a rifle, with a head that swung to and fro like a marionette's? I knew then that there was no such thing as escaping from prison in war time; they take you from a cell and trap you in a battle. And, so thinking, I fell into a heavy, sour sleep.

It was quite dark, and I appeared to be alone. I might have been in my cell again, it was so quiet. The darkness was like a bad taste in my mouth. I was feeling sick and giddy.

Then I heard the footsteps of someone who moved cautiously; and I could imagine him, his hands groping out in front of him, feeling his way towards me; and, half persuaded that I was still in my cell, I got on to my hands and knees and started to crawl across the floor. Crack! went my forehead against a table leg; and a voice spoke among the lights that were shooting behind my eyes: "Dad, who could have fired that shot?"

"I don't know," said a voice that was old and tired and much given to grumbling.

"Where do you think they all went?"

"They scattered, I suppose."

"What shall we do?"

"Lie here quietly."

"Do you think it was Bolsheviks?"

"How should I know?"

This dialogue appeared to come from a far corner of the building. I leaned forward into the darkness.

"Who are you over there?" I said hoarsely.

The first voice uttered a sort of shrill yelp. The second one rumbled back: "And who the devil may you be?" It seemed not to care about the answer.

"I'm from Captain Kappel's command."

"So are we!"

"Aren't there any more of you?"

"No, all gone but us."

"What happened?"

The old voice grumbled a little with itself. "Don't you know?" it said. "Somebody fired a shot, and they all went out through the doors and windows."

"Have you a light?"

"No."

"What are you going to do then?"

"I don't know."

At this point I lost patience with the voice altogether. "Old fool," I shouted, "do you want to wait here for the Bolsheviks to kill you?"

"I think he's right," said the shrill one, changing at the word "Dad" from a high treble to an astounding bass. There was a noise of someone groping his way across the room and fumbling at the door; and our darkness was suddenly opened with a square of greyer light.

Out in the night, my two companions and I looked stupidly at one another's starlit faces. The old voice was a

square-bearded soldier, the kind that is usually an officer's orderly; the shrill voice materialized into a youth of about fifteen years, probably a high school student. With one consent, we turned downhill towards the Volga.

On our way we encountered six or seven Russian soldiers, huddled up in their overcoats, smoking cigarettes on the street's edge. When I asked them who they were, one of them answered:

"Nobody."

"We're from Captain Kappel's command," I volunteered.

"Well, so are we."

At which these new comrades threw away their cigarettes, and started off ahead of us down the hill. I cast one look behind me, where the domes and minarets of Kazan fretted the dim sky-line. They seemed to be vying with Captain Kappel's army, which should be the more fantastic.

On the river's bank the Captain was directing the laying out of a new trench, and swearing volubly at the seven soldiers that had preceded us. "You ran away, you ——" he shouted, with what seemed an excellent command of the more filthy Russian oaths.

"Well," one of them explained, in an injured tone, "this one's a Cossack with three crosses. He ran away, too."

"Damn the Cossack with three crosses," the Captain retorted amiably, "why the hell didn't you hold on to the barracks?"

Remembering that black, deserted building, I thought

that the question deserved no answer, and it received none. But then nothing made any sense that night; not the line of soldiers, digging feverishly in the black earth; not the scattering of civilians, waiting dumbly for something to happen; not the sleeping hillside behind us, among whose streets, for all I knew, the Bolsheviks were already moving. . . .

The trench grew, yawning like a grave; and like ghosts those civilians began to creep into it, settling down on the damp earth to sleep. An officer came out of a small hut, not unlike the Red Cross huts we used to have in the Caucasus, and beckoned to me who, for my sins, was standing nearest him. He told me to collect some men and start digging a trench at right angles to the one already laid out; he spoke in fluent, foreign Russian. So I wandered off, and addressed the first group of idle soldiers I could find, whose morose and sleepy answer was: "Go to hell, we were ordered to stay here;" at which they seemed to huddle together as sheep do against the cold and damp, swearing among themselves in thick, drowsy undertones. Nothing to be done with them.

Nor with the next group, who stared at me in lofty surprise, and answered that they had their orders already, thank you. I wandered back to my officer in some disgust, and found him flinging his arms about in the greatest excitement; he seemed to have forgotten me, and the order he had given me, for he said: "Here you—you're small. Creep over to that wood, and see if there are any Bolsheviks about."



And as luck would have it, the sky was already turning pale, and the stars growing thin and poor. A cold wind, laden with the smell of mist, laid itself heavily upon our faces. Dawn within a few minutes.

Two other soldiers accompanied me—both small men, too: a remarkable hunchback, with a face like a brown, wet leaf, and a uniform several sizes too large for him; and a wizened Tartar, a native of Kazan, whose nostrils wrinkled like a ferret's, sniffing the dawn with apprehension.

The wood was a vague mass, shifting uncannily in the sick light; after two hundred yards or so we began to crawl towards it, for we would make a fair target now. My head, I noticed with some surprise, was perfectly still.

"Wood's full of 'em," the hunchback whispered in my ear, his brown, earthy lips curling with fright above his brown teeth. "I stay here," he added, and immediately flattened himself on the ground, with which he contrived to blend in a highly natural manner.

But I went forward with the little Tartar, crawling foot by foot; already we could hear a murmur of conversation from among the trees. Two hundred yards away—that was near enough, we thought: and as we lay there a cheerful voice came across the ground to us. "It's just a lot of — Czechs against us over there." The voice was so loud that I raised my head in involuntary surprise; the wood, now unnaturally distinct with the new day, seemed to be alive with men.

"There's one . . . out there," and a bullet whined by

my head, and the Tartar and I turned like one man, crawling back towards safety. The air was loud with bullets now, and I couldn't help getting to my feet and running, zig-zagging as I had been taught to do on the Caucasian front. Just ahead of me a piece of earth detached itself from its surroundings, and the hunchback scuttled in ahead of me, with the speed of a scared rabbit.

And there were the trenches, a black scar not a hundred yards in front, into which the hunchback had already gone to ground, head first; and I caught a glimpse of the Tartar, running crazily on my right; and something hit me like an iron club just on my right shoulder.

Blood poured from my mouth. My eyes were filling with a blotchy red darkness. I began to crawl.

A hand pulling me down into the trench. "They're Bolsheviks," I muttered, "they hurt me." "That's all right—go on to the Red Cross." It was Captain Kappel, no less.

Well, I can stand—I can walk; there's only blood streaming down my arm and an ache in my shoulder. I can see, too. It's only a shoulder wound.

The firing had ceased; somebody helped me over to the Red Cross hut, our bodies bent almost to the ground; somebody ripped away the right sleeve of my coat, blouse, and undershirt, dressing the wound as best he could. "Our first wounded," he remarked, his voice shaking with pride. "You shall be sent to hospital immediately," I don't remember him at all, except as somebody whom I despised for a very green soldier.

I was in a four-wheeled *telega*, riding under the broad daylight. Around us stretched the flat reclaimed land across which we were driving along the top of a narrow bank, scarcely wide enough for two carts to pass, taking a roundabout way into the safety of Kazan. An old Tartar was moving slowly ahead of his horse, his eyes fixed heavenward in meditation. The day was loud with a ragged bombardment; but though we were driving in the open, such shells as fell near us were obviously not meant for us. The Tartar, it appeared, was searching the skies for them.

I shouted to him several times to keep his eyes on the road, for the cart was in constant danger of sliding off down the embankment, but he seemed too preoccupied to listen to me, and at last, pointing upward, he screamed in a high, reedy voice:

"Look, *vona, vona*, it flies!"

"What flies, in God's name?"

"A bomb, *vona, vona*! There it goes!"

The horse halted, the ancient stood gaping upward. "I can see her," he mumbled. "I can see her." I reached down with my left hand, the effort turning me sick with pain, hoisted my pistol out, and covered him. "If you don't hurry," I threatened, "I'll shoot you."

The old man jerked in the reins and said reproachfully to his horse:

"Ho! Why so slow?"

I suppose I must have fainted. This was certainly the

hospital in Kazan, and it was evening. I was lying undressed in a clean bed, with a nurse beside me, offering me half a loaf of white bread, still warm from the oven, and a glass of new milk. I should like my memory to fill in some of these gaps. . . . I should like to remember, at least, whether I ate that bread or not.

And somebody shaking me in the dark.

"Get up. The Bolsheviks are taking the town. We've got to evacuate. Hurry up, and get out of here!"

So I crawled out of bed, dressing as best I could with one arm in a sling; sick and giddy and aching, dressing slowly to the sound of frightened cries out in the hospital yard; feeling my way carefully downstairs. . . . "Hurry up and climb in. There aren't any more carts after this." I got wearily in, and as we rumbled out of the empty courtyard, I wondered what the Bolsheviks would have done if they had found me there. The dull crack of rifle fire, just beyond the town, seemed answer enough.

The main road out of Kazan was a dark river of people, in which we were caught, moving sluggishly like a piece of driftwood on a muddy river. Thousands of men, women, and children stumbled and cursed and wept along the night, their backs burdened with enormous sacks of household goods, the sound of rifle fire behind cracking them on like a whip. The soldier who drove us did not spare his whip either; he slashed at the poor creatures in our way, who opened up before us as best they could and closed in behind, like a sullen river; and the night passed

on, and the sound of rifle fire grew fainter, and only our driver's whip cracked in the moving darkness.

Day came up on flat, endless fields. Only soldiers and carts ahead of us, and around us a scattering of civilians; as for the rest, the night seemed to have swallowed them into itself.

And day had scarcely arisen, with a cold wind, and a pale sun, and ragged clouds along the plain's edge, when there was a humming in the sky behind us, and a shout of "Aeroplanes! Take cover!" At which the soldiers rushed into the fields, flattening themselves on the ground, while the few civilians stood about, staring vacantly skywards before it dawned upon them that they must do the same.

Our cart was driven off the road into the cover of a clump of poplars, bumping between the first tree trunks just as that humming grew to a mighty roar, and the road blew up with nine almost exactly spaced showers of earth and rock. When we emerged there was nothing to be seen on the wide sky but three dots; nothing on the road but nine jagged holes; and, strangely enough, nobody was hurt.

All day long we jolted across the plain, soundless and empty, swallowing us up; by noon of the next day we were told that all the food had given out, and that we must reach Cheliabinsk at the best pace. "There is a railroad there. Who knows? You may get a train."

Who knows, indeed? We crawled over that interminable road, and the blood, which had surged up in my mouth again, dried upon my face, a brown mask with a

sickening smell. My arm was numb and I could not move it. Towards evening we rumbled into a little village, a huddle of straw-thatched huts; and there, on the school-house floor, they laid us out to sleep.

No food, of course, but some kind of hot drink, which should have been tea; and the dirty floor, because it did not sway and creak from rut to rut, was almost a soft bed to me. . . .

"Hist!" It was a soldier with a paraffin lamp who had wakened me by pulling at the tip of my ear, so that I came out of sleep without a sound. He bent down beside my bed and began to whisper a long story to me—the story of a girl, a young girl, who had returned to her estate in order to regain her health, and how she was alone in the big house and in danger. "Bolsheviks are all around here," he whispered, "and I want to get her away. So when one of the drivers told me about you—that you were a girl—it gave me an idea. If you have any military papers, I may be able to get the girl through. Otherwise, she'll be killed. Won't you help? No harm can come to you in a hospital train."

Oh yes, I said, I would help; but I explained that I had nothing but hospital papers, which bore my name and the name of my old regiment, and some papers from the Czechs, a discharge from prison. The soldier said he thought the hospital papers would do; so I gave him those; and he gave me some document in exchange, which, being weary for sleep, I didn't bother to examine.

And the next morning, early, we were on our way

again; and it may have been midday when we reached our station, not far from which a few houses had gathered around what looked like a mosque. An empty, grey plain behind us, across which a thin wind picked its way, fingering the few ragged trees around our station. What had happened to all those people who had come with us through the first night?

We waited there until almost evening, cold and hungry; and in the chill of twilight, a train screamed out on the plain, and came at last to a halt beside us. It was nothing but a line of mud-coloured horse boxes, crowded with people; people on the roofs, people clinging to the footboard.

A civilian train, all right; so our Czecho-Slovaks began to clear a box for us, routing people out with their rifle butts; and when we were helped into its filthy interior, we found that the late occupants had rigged some kind of bunks up there, upon which we lay, indifferent to those lesser Russians whom not even a Czech can dislodge—the grey multitudes of lice.

They gave us bread, too, and potatoes: having levied them from other wretches in the train—you can do anything with rifles, and rifles were the only law this evening. I remember, just before we left, how a buxom peasant woman—in her middle thirties, I should judge—stood at the box car door begging our soldiers to let her in. But they didn't; are Czechs always so virtuous?

I think it was midnight, during one of our inevitable halts, when a soldier entered our car to take our names

down; nor, until he had reached me, did I remember having traded papers. So I fumbled with my left hand, making it look as difficult as I could, and said at last: "Come back in a minute. I'll have them ready for you."

The document, on hasty examination, proved to be a passport made out in the name of Princess — This was serious. I couldn't hope to pass myself off as a Princess. And I was deep in thought, the passport spread across my knee, when the soldier returned. He took it up before I had a chance to conceal it from him.

"Ah ha! A Princess? Well, what shall we do, Princess?"

"That's just what I'm thinking," I replied.

"Shall I write down some other name?"

"Yes, yes, that's it. Write down Marina Yurlova."

And that was an easy escape. As I folded the papers up, before putting them in my pocket, I decided then and there to destroy them as soon as I could.

The train moved slowly along a bleak country. At every little station the people crowded off it, running to find water so that they could make tea, spreading out into the village if there was a village, yelling like madmen. And every now and again, we saw some regiment or other, marching in the narrow road across our tracks; and an occasional Red Cross train would crawl past us. No escape from war—here or in the Caucasus, Tsar or Bolshevik or Czech, it didn't matter: no escape from

war.



That night we pulled in at a little siding, with nothing to eat or drink, and no tobacco: and, while the wounded men with me didn't seem to bother about food, they were nervous and irritable—starving for tobacco. A man who had been sent to scout for us came back with the news that he could find no food, but that a trainload of what he could swear was Czecho-Slovak supplies was sidetracked only a few hundred yards up the line.

Those of us who could climbed down from our car at this news, hunted up the train, and found it heavily guarded. "Leave this to me," I said, and went boldly up to the guard.

"I'm a girl," I began, "and I have served under a Czecho-Slovak captain. You will see that my right arm is in a sling. I got that wound while under the command of a Czecho-Slovak captain. Captain Kappel he was called, a very brave man. Now I have no food, nor have these comrades of mine, and who is more fitting to supply us with it than you?"

The guard sergeant shook his head. "Sorry. We have orders to deliver this food to our lines and to nowhere else."

"But, comrade . . ." I started, realizing with terror that my head had begun to wobble again.

"No food to you, comrade."

At this I lost my temper. "Listen, you lousy prisoners," I shouted, "give us some bread and tobacco and be quick about it."

"Sorry, this train belongs to Czecho-Slovaks."

Someone spoke up behind me: "And Czecho-Slovaks belong to us. They are our prisoners of war."

"Sorry, can't do a thing for you. Our orders are to deliver this to the front. We can't touch anything ourselves, and we're just as hungry for tobacco as you."

The argument by this time had attracted a young officer, at whose sudden appearance the guard came smartly to attention. "What seems to be the trouble?" he asked me in excellent Russian. And when I told him, standing to attention, my left hand at the salute, he asked me to come back with him to his compartment, which was furnished like an office, with a typewriter, books and papers. And, discovering that I was a girl, he even had his orderly serve me with coffee and sliced bread, and begged me to stay afterwards and be comfortable.

He asked me for my name, and I gave him both of them, the real and the false; something for which I was afterwards to be very thankful indeed. And when he pressed me to stay—"I must get back," I said, "and thank you for everything. And won't you please give me some food and tobacco for our wounded men?"

"They will follow immediately," he said: and I bowed myself out, barely able to keep my tears back, he had been so kind and so friendly.

Towards Siberia—the rumour had got around at last that we were going towards Siberia. Already, we were running beneath the Ural Mountains, snow-capped, with pine-trees tracing fantastic blue-green designs against the

white background: the Ural Mountains, confronting our noisy train like a sufficient word that was spoken when the world began. And the early winter seemed pleasant enough, the sun warm, the air dry and clear. It was good to stretch one's legs at the stations and breathe the air in. But the nights were what I feared: in the darkness, in the creaking box car, with the lice; when the box car would be shut beyond hope of ventilation, save what crept in by the various minute cracks at door and ceiling, when we would lie in an intolerable atmosphere, cold and thick, stinking of human bodies, and of human wounds. . . .

The farther east we travelled, the more civilians left our train. I imagine they preferred the bare welcome of the villages and towns we had passed, crouched along the track like animals, to the chances of a winter's night on a car roof or riding a buffer.

And now we had crawled deep into the mountain country, a more severe country than my own; even in the spring, or the early summer, you could not imagine any fragrance in those stark forests, or any flowers; you could not imagine any pleasure on those steep ascents. It was a land where gaiety had been frozen at birth, and romance never born.

One morning we pulled up at a little station, nothing but the bare track and a tiny wooden box for a station-master's house; and beyond, not a hundred yards away, the single street of a wretched town, with the sun blazing from its frozen pools. At the far end of the street a small

crowd was advancing towards the station and our waiting train, their angry voices ragged in the keen air. As they drew nearer, we could make out men and women, armed with rifles and picks and shovels, with clubs and with carving knives, raising like a savage chant the single phrase: "Death to the Bolsheviks."

In their midst were a tall sailor and a young Jew, Bolshevik agitators, who had been discovered the day before on a train, bound as we were for the far east. The sailor, a great bear of a man, with surprising hair like the colour of fine gold, seemed quite indifferent to his fate; he was strolling calmly along, his hands in his pockets. He scarcely noticed the kicks and shoves which were bestowed on him, shrugging them off as if they were no account; nor could the most violent efforts dislodge his hands from his pockets. But the Jew on the other hand, who was no more than a bag of skin and bones, cried out for mercy, throwing himself at the men's feet, clutching the women's skirts.

Behind the station-master's hut there stood a single lamp-post, its rusty iron arm just high enough above the ground to permit the sailor to hang with an inch or so to spare. His hands still in his pockets, he watched their preparations with an air of perfect detachment. The Jew was grovelling on the ground, clawing at the legs, kissing the boots of his executioners.

When he saw the rope was ready, the sailor strolled towards it; out came his strong unshaken hands for the first time, to put the noose around his own neck. The men

who had gathered at the other end stood to watch him; and, like people who pause to catch their breath, the crowd was silent.

"Well, why don't you pull?" demanded the sailor, arrogant in the very face of death.

So they pulled, and the sailor swung round and round, his hair shining in the sunlight, his feet kicking terribly just an inch or so above the ground, his hands clawing at the rope around his neck. And the Jew shrieked to see how terrible a thing they were going to do to him next.

I turned away, sick and miserable. I had seen a proud man die, and there was no nobility in his manner of dying; I did not want to see a worse outrage on humanity, I did not want to see a coward go to his death.

We did not leave the station until evening, and my last view of that village was the bodies of the sailor and the young Jew, swinging gently against the sunset; brave man or coward, it didn't matter any more.

And the last of all the memories which make up the broken pattern of my flight from Kazan, is this:—An early winter morning, with a little grey light spilt from the lowering clouds, and snow on the ground. Fires have been lit beyond the tracks, around which we and the peasants who have come along with us, or have joined us on the way, are gathered to cook what food there is; it is mostly potatoes, and we are glad to have them.

I am not accustomed to the manners of the North. At each fire, the peasants are carefully delousing themselves

—men and women taking off their clothes without shame or concern, standing naked against the red fires, shaking the lice out of this ragged garment and that.

No sunrise that day, but this:

The fire glowing red upon a woman's white body, incomparably young, standing taut before it, and a tender shadow between her breasts, and a tender hollow darkness under the upraised arms and in the gentle curve of the groin. . . .

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

### AN ASYLUM IN OMSK

FROM Zlatoust, the mining town, which sprawls without plan up and down its half-dozen of steep hills, we moved on to Omsk, which lies upon the Siberian border. Omsk—like Zlatoust, like twenty other communities we had passed on the last stage, like every town beyond the border—is a sad and depressing place, squinting at you through the grey little windows of its tiny houses, above which the huge chimneys shed their dirty feathers of smoke. Omsk has nothing to show but a beautiful bridge; you may wonder, as I did, how the bridge came to be there, in a place which offers no invitation to beauty.

Here was our destination, as it seemed—a large hospital, already over-crowded with wounded and with sick, because of an epidemic of typhoid fever, then raging through Siberia.

The hospital was stuffy; its windows, which had been shivered by the cold, stuffed tight with ancient pillows—the smoke from stove fires lying heavy in the rooms. It was a tired place—doctors, nurses, patients, servants, everyone was tired; tired of wounds and sickness, tired of

the dead cold. I could almost believe the story that a Tartar patient told me, and which is told in every cold country, I imagine, all over the world:

"In winter the temperature drops so low here that you can't hear anybody talk. Voices become frozen, and then in the spring, with the thaw, you may hear voices in the street and see nobody. These are the voices that froze last winter."

I stayed in bed until my wound had healed completely. It is still a mystery how little it had bothered me on the journey up, when it had been no more than a constant ache, not easily forgotten but never beyond endurance. For a steel-jacketed bullet, it seems, had penetrated my shoulder, just touching the lung, and had come out at the back; that was why my mouth had bled. The wound was in bad condition now, and the doctors were forced to cut away the partly healed flesh in order to get their probes in—an operation which was excruciatingly painful, but which I did not rebel against, for they told me that unless I submitted to treatment, I should lose my arm.

My ward was a poor place for convalescence. It was small, foul, crowded, with bedding even on the floor. This was the case all over the hospital. The typhoid patients were so numerous that it was impossible to isolate them completely, and it sometimes happened that dead men lay among the living for hours, before they were discovered. Not in my ward, as luck would have it, where, so far as I can remember, there was not even a



single death. But even my ward had a certain grimness, which the hospital in Moscow itself could not hope to equal: and so it came about that one of the doctors, who had been particularly solicitous about the swinging of my head, suggested that I should move.

He had a friend, so he said, in the psychopathic wing, and I could have a room there to myself if I did not object to the immediate society of shell shock and demented soldiers.

A *sanitar*, an Austrian prisoner of war, took my things and I followed him across a big yard to a separate building, some distance from the central hospital. A long low building, every window securely barred. A long low building which, when its door opened to us, emitted a positive roar of silence.

After you have been in a hospital ward where everybody coughs and chatters, where everybody—even the most ill—is laughing or groaning, where people behave as nature instructs them, belching loudly after their meals and spitting on the dirty floor, why, silence is the loudest thing in the world. And then I heard, as our feet echoed on the floor, a sweet thin voice, singing a hymn in praise of the Virgin Mary. Yes, the building was quite silent but for our hollow echoes and a voice praising the Virgin Mary.

*"Oh Maid, Lily of Heaven . . ."*

Another Austrian *sanitar* opened the door for me. What a clean-looking room that was, almost scented with the absence of smell; what a clean white bed, with a little

table beside it and a low, rush-bottom chair! Nothing in that room to fear but the high, barred window.

The *sanitar* had closed the door and locked it.

It was good to rest, to lie on the bed and think of nothing, to let the cleanness soak into my pores like warm water; to drowse, and wake up, and drowse again; and see with what a gentle pace the day drifted through that room, until at last it was almost dark.

The *sanitar* came back with a paraffin lamp, and a bowl of really good soup; there was no oily smell in *that* soup. A certain amount of noise entered the room with it, a sort of muttering, not too pleasant to hear. But when he shut the door he shut the noise out, too.

"Think of that," I said to myself, smiling with pleasure. "In Omsk, the dirty, cold city, they have sound-proof rooms in their hospital; in Omsk, which is certainly on the edge of nowhere!" The idea appealed to me enormously, and when I finished my soup, I went to bed in great happiness.

The next morning I woke up with the same feeling of pleasure and content; and it may have been three or four days that life passed in this way until the weariness of that long flight from Kazan at last left me. And then my wound began to hurt, and it seemed that my right arm had grown shorter and the fingers of my hand were numb and cold, almost as though they had been frozen.

They hadn't dressed my arm since I had been in this place; that was the trouble. They couldn't have forgotten about me; it was very strange none the less. So the next

time the *sanitar* came in, I asked him to call my doctor; and he said "Yes, yes." But no doctor came.

That evening the soup he brought me was thin and cold, and he didn't leave any lamp behind him when he left.

That night I cried a little into my pillow. I was frightened but, more than that, I had begun to discover that I was very lonely.

"Where is the doctor?"

I wanted not to sob, it was the third day since I had asked for him; it was—because the *sanitar* visited me just twice a day—the sixth time I had asked that question. And for the sixth time he answered "Yes, yes." Nothing more. It didn't matter that I was crying, that my head was swinging to and fro; he knew that I was hungry, too—it didn't matter; it didn't matter to him—nothing mattered.

("Yes, yes;" and when he has set the bowl of watery soup down, and the slice of bread; and when he has emptied the slops, and cleaned the room a little; and when he has stared all around him once, to satisfy himself that everything is in order—then he will move quietly out, and close the door quietly behind him, and the key will click in the oiled lock. He has done that every day, twice a day.)

"Let me out of here!" I shouted, just as he turned to go. "Let me out, do you hear?" But he might have been quite deaf. His eyes blinked a little, his mouth pursed into

what, with a more emotional man, might have been satisfaction. The door shut behind him.

So they thought I was insane.

It had all been a trick from the start; just because my head was swinging, just because something had happened long ago in the Persian mountains, I was here shut up in a sound-proof room in Omsk. From Persia you must travel to Siberia in order to finish up in a madhouse.

I flung myself against the door, jarring my wounded shoulder, beating with my free hand on the panels. But it wouldn't do to make a scene, because then they would certainly think me insane. Besides, they couldn't hear. Go back to your bed and cry, but don't shout. It won't do you any good.

After another week of this, I thought that perhaps I was insane, that I had been insane all along. It's easy to think that—in a soundless room, all alone with yourself: with two visits a day from a *sanitar* who doesn't speak, and who looks at you in private satisfaction; with nothing to do but watch the light change, and the shadows advance from the corners, and the dreary night come. . . .

It was on the last day of that week in the morning that the *sanitar* broke his silence. "You will follow me to the dining-room," he said. And, wrapped in my hospital robe, I pattered after him, scarcely daring to believe that I had been granted this much freedom.

But the dining-room was, if anything, worse. It was a long, bare room with a black table down the middle, and

a number of hard wooden chairs for the patients—men in various stages of dress and undress, not one of whom turned his head towards the door. They all looked terribly depressed, and one or two seemed to be in a stupor; and as for the atmosphere, it seemed to whisper and mutter, there was a soundless rustle in it, as if one could hear these men's imprisoned thoughts twisting and turning in their brains.

*Sanitars* brought soup for each man. Some ate it, with an appearance of interest, breaking between spoonfuls into headlong fragments of speech; others stared at their bowls indifferently. The man opposite me looked fixedly at a point on the wall just over his head. A *sanitar* came across to him, put a spoon into his hand, dipped the spoon full of soup, carried it to the man's lips, and then left him. The man continued eating the soup mechanically, his vacant eyes still fixed on the wall; and even after the bowl was empty he went through the motions of eating, carrying the spoon back and forth to his mouth, making a dismal clatter in the tin bowl. He even moved his mouth as if he were eating.

I sat watching him in silence, and slowly finished my own soup. Lunch over, all the men rose except the "mechanical" man, who only stopped his awful dumb show when a *sanitar* took the spoon away from him, and held his hand still for a moment. I got up from the table, my nerves still shivering from what I had seen; but I had only walked half-way across the floor, when another of the inmates approached, his hands stretched out in sup-

plication. He had a perfectly round hairless head; there was nothing remarkable in his round, clay-yellow face but a pair of blazing fanatic blue eyes.

"Oh, Mother of our God," he began to babble, in a high, shaking voice, "Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ, and of all men, deliver me from this torture. Your Son died for all people, so why must we suffer so much and cause so much pain and suffering?"

He fell to his knees, crossing himself, and kissed the hem of my hospital robe. His mouth mumbled against the robe: "Deliver me, deliver me, deliver me." How did this crazy man know that I was a girl? I stood there, holding my body back from him, the nails of my left hand digging hard into the palm. And a *sanitar* led him away, and as he went he sang in a thin sweet voice, staring over his shoulder at me, his slack yellow mouth moving obscenely into song:

*"Oh Maid, Lily of Heaven . . ."*

Next day I ate again in the dining-room, where the scene of the day before was repeated with little variation. Opposite me sat the same man, going through the same motions. . . .

Only now his vacant eyes were fixed on me.

I kept my eyes on my plate for as long as I could, but at last I couldn't resist it any longer—I had to look up. And then a horrible thing happened. I found that he was imitating me; as I looked up into those dreadful, empty, unreflecting eyes, I found that his head was swinging like my own. And I burst into tears, burying my head in my

arms, and sobbing loudly; while the men around me continued with their meal, impassively, as if they heard nothing and saw nothing. And a *sanitar* led me away. . . .

There was no need to tell the days—each one was exactly like its predecessor; and the scenes I have just described repeated themselves, scarcely changing in the smallest detail. I think I managed to keep sane only out of fear; I knew that I had something which those wretched men had lost; and I was afraid, beyond telling, that one day that rustling silence in the dining-room would take it from me, too. Almost a fortnight passed in this way; it was the longest fortnight in my whole life.

One morning a nurse came into my room, and asked me my name. I dared not beg her to let me go, though the words almost burst from me; I dared not tell her that I wasn't insane. I was afraid that if I did that she would think me crazy: so I gave her my name, and said no more. She came back in about an hour, just as I was losing hope, and told me to follow her.

"Go down the corridor," she said, "and into the first room on your right. Somebody is waiting for you there."

And as I entered the little room, a slim figure rose to his feet, and stood looking at me in silence; and for a moment I blinked my eyes rapidly, unable to believe that what I saw there was true. It was the Czecho-Slovak Captain, the one who had given us food in central Russia. For a long minute we stood in perfect silence, which neither of us seemed able to break. Then at last I whispered:

"Have you come to take me away?"

"Yes."

"This is an insane asylum, you know."

"Yes, I know. Get your clothes now, and come with me to the Czech headquarters. They are clean, Marina, and they're not such a madhouse."

I asked him no questions, but left to get my clothes, dressing in a trembling hurry, afraid that something would happen, and that he would go away and leave me. But there he was—standing where I had left him, looking sad and pensive. His eyes lit up a little when he saw me, and he took me by the arm and hurried me outside, almost as though he had the same fear as I, that somebody would grab me and pull me back, and lock me in my room for ever and ever.

A sleigh was waiting for him outside, and as he wrapped the rug carefully round my feet: "I've been searching hospitals for weeks," he said, "hoping to find you." And the driver whipped up his horse, and the sleigh moved along the crisp snow, and the bells rang down into my heart. But I had no answer for him, nor did he say any more.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

### GOOD-BYE TO LOVE

THE Czech headquarters was a two-storied brick building, its doorless entrance giving on to dark wooden stairs, up which we climbed to the second floor: and I found myself in a little room, rather like an office, and took off my coat, its right sleeve still filthy with dirt and blood. The Captain told me that he would arrange for clean clothing, and went out, returning within thirty minutes with a suit of clean underwear, a pair of socks, and a clean blouse, while his orderly followed, carrying a tin basin of water, a cake of soap, and a large clean towel draped over his shoulder.

"Take your time," said the Captain. "My orderly will be just outside the door to see that nobody disturbs you." And with that he left me; and I only realized, when I was midway through my bath, that I'd still to thank him.

I was sitting, swinging my legs on the table, when he came back.

"Don't worry about that," he said, when I began to murmur my gratitude. "Why not come out with me and have some dinner? It would be better, perhaps, than

catching a meal here, and we shall have some chance to talk."

And that was the first time in my life that I had been invited out to dinner by a man.

There he is, sitting across the table from me. His hair is yellow, cut almost *en brosse*, and already receding from the high forehead; he has deep grey eyes, shadowed with the faint blue of tiredness—fine eyes, set rather wide, his nose is short and straight, his mouth firm; and the oval face is just marred by a trace of cleft in the chin. A handsome man; but now he is very weary in mind and body, and beneath the normal brown of his complexion there is a shadow of grey. His hands, with their too long fingers, are never still; he has crumbled the bread beside him into a little mound.

It is a restaurant such as I had not expected to find in this grim town, a restaurant which conceals—behind its disreputable façade—all the order and luxury and gaiety of another world, a gleaming, soft-spoken, soft-footed world, where the lights are subdued and the laughter. I have seen enough luxurious restaurants since then, and perhaps they have re-shaped my memory of this one; perhaps it was not so fine after all. But let it stay. This shall be my gift to the undeserving town of Omsk.

Hospital food required no skill to handle—just seize your spoon, any way you like, and put the soup down you before it grows cold. But these more polite dishes seemed

to defy me; I had almost forgotten my table manners, and then I had only the use of one hand. The Captain saw my embarrassment, took my meat from me with a word of apology, and cut it into small pieces. . . .

As the meal progressed he asked me to tell my story; but I had scarcely begun before he broke in, turning a fork over and over in his fingers, telling me fragments out of his own past. It was only then that I realized how lonely he was. He told me of the little Bohemian town where he had been raised, beneath the Tatra Mountains; and of Prague, where he had gone to earn his living. "The navel of the world," he called it, and spoke of the gardens on its hills, and how he used to climb every Sunday up to the old castle, to hear mass in St. George's Church, and how the Austrian officers and their ladies drove every afternoon to take tea in the Wencesplatz, "But we have changed all that now."

He had deserted the Austrian army at the first opportunity, for all good Bohemians hated the Austrians. He had left a girl behind him, and had not heard of her since he deserted. "Perhaps she is dead now, for all I know; there would not be much food in Prague, it would all go to Vienna or to Budapest. Yes, she must have suffered. And I'm afraid I have not been too faithful to Zdenka; but what could a man do, who may die the next day, any day?"

And he tried to explain his interest in me, saying that it was not altogether because I was a girl, but because he saw at once that I had suffered more than I should. "You

were the first person I had seen for months, who interested me at all. Do you know that you have very strange eyes? There is a lot in them that I can see now, and saw then, a lot of suffering; so I said to myself, those eyes are going to need me one day, and I swore I wouldn't lose sight of you." The next sentence thrust itself almost brutally from his dreamy speech. "If you weren't wounded in an inconvenient way, I should be making love to you now."

The blood drained from my face and flowed down into my body like a torrent, and my thinking mind went out like a candle in a strong wind, and there was a warmth in my body that leaned towards him, without any will of mine to stop it. But he was already preoccupied with some other thought. "I'd like you to get out of Siberia," he was saying, frowning at the tablecloth, "and go to the Far East. There are many American hospitals out there, and they'd do a fine job on your arm. I'll find out more about it to-morrow."

Perhaps it was a good thing that he did not see my eyes just then. Or perhaps he knew.

But at any rate, until we left the restaurant, we talked together rather cheerlessly—mostly about hospitals.

Back at headquarters, I found that a cot had been placed for me in the office, and was told that if I wanted anything in the night all I had to do was bang the chair leg on the floor, and the orderly would come at once: and then the Captain said a rather stiff good night.

I slept till morning, in a velvet sleep that smoothed all

the tiredness out of me. After breakfast—during which a can of American milk made its alien appearance—the Captain came in, in something of a hurry. “It’s Vladivostok for you,” he said, “or Harbin. There are American hospitals at both. I thought it all out in the night. I’m going down to the head office now, and if I can get you a letter to those hospitals, you can start to-day.” And sure enough he came back before two hours were up, bringing a letter and a railroad pass.

“On to Vladivostok!” he said, but only his mouth smiled.

The train was timed for two o’clock, and it was not more than three before it roared in—an orderly train, only three-quarters full, an almost *clean* train. The Captain helped me into a third-class car and followed me along to the compartment, where he waited until the second bell rang.

And neither of us had a word to say; not a single word.

I followed him out to the head of the steps. He stood below me, staring towards the engine, his long fingers working in his belt, until the third bell rang. Then he started, and stretched out his hand just as though he had forgotten something, and said: “Good-bye.” Clumsily, I gave him my left hand. The train began to move.

He was walking beside it, his face turned upward. “I expect to be in Vladivostok in about two months. . . . Look me up at the Czecho-Slovakian Legation. Don’t forget—the Legation.” The train was gathering speed,

and as it left him behind, his last words came more faintly: "God bless you, Marina."

My throat choked me, and the unshed tears seemed to have frozen in my heart like heavy crystal: and it seemed, too, as though there were a void in me, as though the better part of my body had been left behind. And then—how shall I tell it?—the crystal burst into fragments: and with that bitter intuition that comes only to the very young and comes only once, I knew what it meant to part from a lover, unconfessed, for ever, for ever unsatisfied.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

### THE TRAIN STOPS

WHEN I got back to my compartment, I discovered a little parcel on the seat, with my name printed boldly on it. I had not seen the Captain leave it there, and now, on getting this last reminder of him, I began to cry softly, my fingers fumbling blindly at the knots.

His parting gift, when at last I got it open, proved to be another suit of underwear; and those who please may call this a very unromantic ending; indeed it may seem that so brief and unfulfilled a story deserves no more. But that was no ordinary gift; it was not made of the coarse saffron material provided for soldiers, but of fine white linen. Beside it, wrapped in brown paper, lay ten bars of chocolate, something which I had not tasted since Tiflis; and four handkerchiefs—I'd almost forgotten the use of them; and an envelope. I turned the envelope over in my hand for a long while, thinking to find a letter there, and not daring to open it through some fear of what I should find there; for even the intimacy of a letter was fearful to me at that moment, who had just learned the beginning of love.

But in the envelope lay a red package—a hundred roubles, in ten-rouble notes, a fortune! And no letter.

I wrapped everything up again, put one of the ten-rouble notes in my pocket, unwound the bandages around my wrist, and tucked the remaining nine in there. Then I sat back and asked myself, for the next half-hour, why there had been no letter, a faint sense of anger stirring amidst my gratitude; for surely, I thought, what had happened to me must have happened to him.

But the passions of eighteen, if they come sharply, do not remain long; and the sentiment that stays when they are gone is not so very important. Indeed, the Captain must mean more to me now, as something to hold apart in my memory, than he did then. I had soon forgotten almost everything but the fact of the money hidden in my bandages, and was wondering, with some excitement, about what my destination would bring forth. Nothing to be seen from the windows but a vague landscape, already confused with an early twilight; nobody shared my compartment with me—an almost fantastic luxury, for which I paid with a mounting sense of loneliness; nothing ahead but Siberia, roaring towards us. . . .

It was dark when we pulled up at a brightly lighted station.

The train would stay here for half an hour, as the guard informed me; so I got down, and wandered off to the station buffet, where the tables were already thronged with officers in their old-time uniforms. Their gaiety may have been a little forced, for all I know, but it made a



violent contrast with the gloom I had left behind me—as I hoped, for ever. And it was with an altogether new excitement that I approached a table where two officers of lower rank were waiting for their dinner, and asked them if I might sit down, since there was no room elsewhere.

“Certainly,” said one. “What—you wounded? By the Reds, eh? Well, we’ll put them back just where they belong. Where did it happen?”

“At Kazan, your nobleness,” I answered.

“Kazan, eh? That was a quick gain and a quicker loss.”

“Don’t know how the Reds did it,” grumbled his companion. “No guns, no stores, no clothes, no organization, no nothing.”

At this point the waiter appeared at his elbow and he ordered *schi*, a delicious Siberian sauerkraut soup, the first officer and myself following suit.

“Well,” he continued, “it’s all in the game, I suppose. And they’re the losers now. The Czechs captured all the gold reserve that was stored in Kazan, and went off with every bit of ammunition, and most of the clothing. So if the Reds want a lousy Tartar town they’re welcome to it, that’s what I say. They can eat the snow there and keep warm with that.”

“If it hadn’t been for the Jews,” said the first officer, with the indifference of one who has made this remark at least a hundred times before, “there wouldn’t be any Reds. *Internationalism*, my eye! That’s a long word for a short way of letting in a pack of dirty Jews!”



SCENES NEAR ANY SIBERIAN VILLAGE  
DURING THE GUERILLA WARFARE



And, the soup arriving at this point, the two set to work on it without any more discussion.

When we left, with the ringing of the second bell, I followed not far behind the two officers, and one of them turned and asked me where I was going.

"Vladivostok, your nobleness, to the American Red Cross, or Harbin, perhaps."

"So. And where are you riding?"

"Third-class, your nobleness."

"So." He turned to his companion. "There's plenty of room in our car. Why not have the poor little devil in with us?"

"All right with me," said the other. "Where's your luggage, you?"

I held up my little parcel; and they began to laugh.

Settled in their second-class compartment, the only other occupant of which was a thin, dyspeptic colonel with enormous up-turned moustaches, they began to question me about my army career. It was while I was talking about the Caucasus that one of my friends suddenly pointed his finger at me and shouted:

"You're the girl! I!"

"What?"

"You *are* a girl, aren't you?" I nodded. "I thought so," he said, smiling triumphantly. "I was in the Caucasus myself, back in '16, and I remember a Georgian officer telling me some yarn or other about a girl who fought all through the campaign with the Cossacks."

At this point, the dyspeptic colonel came to life.

"Talking about Reds," he said, though we hadn't been, "I'm told that all the gold reserve is here in Siberia. In fact I don't know how they carry on. They fight with nothing. I've seen their troops myself, because the — drove us out of Kiev, and by God their pants and shirts were in ribbons, and their rifle shoulders were torn to the flesh, and they hadn't anything on their feet but straw. We used to laugh at them—this isn't the place to go to hospital, we'd say: but they drove us out, none the less, being ten to our one, or thereabouts."

"What do they eat?"

"Horse manure!" said the colonel solemnly. And everyone roared.

But I felt sorry for that ragged army. They were *men*, no doubt of that—I had seen them fight; and there was something noble about their battle for freedom, which made these well-fed officers a little shoddy by comparison—as though, in this drama that was being played out in Russia, the villain had somehow proved to be the better man.

The compartment was growing hazy with cigarette smoke, and I began to drowse, while the three officers discussed the Revolution, their argument weaving in and out of my head like a dream. Petlura, and Skaropatski, and Mahno; Kaledin, Alexeev, Kornilov, Ardeli; Pakrovski and Wrangel. The names drifted through the blue haze, names which meant little to me then, though I have learned all about them now. About midnight, seeing me nodding there in my corner, one of them pulled out a

bunk for me. I went to sleep, money in my pocket, food in my stomach, free at last, free. . . .

Next morning, I stood in the corridor while my companions dressed and made ready for the day—a day consumed in more endless discussion of the Bolsheviks, and ending with promises of a gala dinner when we should arrive in Tomsk.

But the station at Tomsk was in a great disturbance when we got there the next day: the Bolsheviks were coming, so we heard. Must I leave Russia altogether, I thought, to escape from the Bolsheviks?

The colonel had left us in a hurry, his moustaches bristling with excitement; but the two officers waited, and I waited with them. Two armoured cars were shunted on to our train; and White soldiers crowded into them; and within an hour we were off.

The rest of that day we roared across the plain, and through another uneventful night, and into the morning, level on the plain.

And in that empty plain, quite suddenly, we stopped.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

### ACROSS SIBERIA

THE train stopped; the sixteen cars, and the two armoured cars, and the great Trans-Siberian engine, stopped; the emptiness of the plain pushed like a weight against the windows. We were going no farther, the train men said, for the Bolsheviks occupied Irkutsk and this was the end of the line—for us. The White soldiers got down, and began to prepare a bivouac by the trackside; the passengers got down, panic-stricken and querulous; Bolsheviks in Tomsk, Bolsheviks far ahead in Irkutsk; there was nothing to do, you could not go forward and you could not go back.

My two officers went over to the engineer, and told him that the train must proceed to Irkutsk, and be damned to the Reds. But the old voice of authority fell on indifferent dirty ears, and for the first time I was to hear a workman refuse to obey an order. "We can't go any farther," said the engineer, roughly. "There is only one way, and that's back, if you care to take it. Don't try to tell me my business." At which the two gentlemen looked rather foolish and crestfallen, nor did they attempt to argue:

take away the title of "nobleness," leave them stranded in a Siberian steppe midway between two Bolshevik armies, and it becomes apparent that the engineer *does* know his business.

The two wandered off along the railroad track, kicking the ties with the toes of their boots, swearing together; and having little else to do, I followed behind them. At last the train was no more than a black worm in the dry snowy wastes behind us; and ahead we could make out a little wooden house. "A telegraph station, by God," said one of the officers. "Come along, now we'll get some action."

But the two underfed operators, whom we found warming their feet by the stove, had no comfort for us; the wires were not cut, they said, but so crossed that any message coming through would be quite incoherent. "And since there aren't any line men left, it's impossible to locate the trouble."

"One of you couldn't go, I suppose," said one of my companions, sarcastically.

"No, we have orders to stay here."

"Orders from whom?"

"Just orders, friend, just orders."

No good staying here. My two ex-noblenesses turned without a word and stumped out.

All day we huddled round the fires that had been built by the railroad track, while talk of being caught between two Bolshevik armies mounted almost to an hysteria. At last a fairly elderly officer—a colonel, who looked as



tough as whipcord—announced that he, at least, was obliged to get to Vladivostok and that, if we did not care to follow him, he must start out alone the next morning. He had a map spread out on his knees. "I shall dress up like a peasant," he said, "and get through Irkutsk somehow. Then across Lake Baikal into Manchuria, where it ought to be fairly safe."

But he had no lack of followers. Most of the officers said they would go with him; all agreed that the idea was good. Even the women, many of them of noble birth, seemed to think anything preferable to sitting out in a Siberian waste, beside a cold engine, waiting for the Bolsheviks. And I, too, was forced into a decision. If the Reds learned that I had been wounded in battle against them, I knew of a lot of things they could do to me. If I destroyed my papers, and swore that I had been fighting against the Whites, what good would that do? I would be taking sides. There was obviously nothing for it but to accompany these passengers—at least a hundred of them, there were—and try to get into safety.

So the next morning we left for the nearest village—a few filthy, windowless huts, a thin trickle of smoke. The Mongols there trafficked with us in sheepskin coats and other shapeless clothing of Siberia; and I bought a fur-lined jacket for five roubles, a price which would certainly have been trebled had they known of the money concealed in my bandages. The things they sold us were, by comparison with the clothes they wore themselves, almost clean; at least you could bear to put them on. They

were a yellow, wrinkled people, as silent as the wastes in which they lived, and no more friendly: but some half dozen of them, for a little fortune in roubles, offered to guide us to Irkutsk.

There was an ancient trail across Siberia and it was this we followed day after day; until the count of days disappeared, and time itself vanished between the indifferent sky and the indifferent snow. But it was not unpleasant. Ever since I could remember. Siberia had been mentioned with something like horror as the place of exile and the place of death; yet one winter's day beneath the forts at Erzerum, or under the shadow of Ararat, would have been less endurable than the empty month we spent, crawling over an endless plain, with the air like dry wine, and a following wind.

And Siberia is beautiful, too, and various, though I have no words to describe it, for it seems to me now like a place with its own language which finds no answer in the human mind.

Some days we would be cheered with the sight of woods, lying far ahead of us, like frozen smoke on the snow, and would sleep that night in holes, dug in the snow, with our heads inside our coats, for our breath to keep us warm; while the Mongols lit a scented, smoky fire of fir wood, standing on guard while we rested. Some nights our fires blazed a message far across the plain, for any enemy to see, and the ladies gathered round them, laughing, and chattering in French—a brave, polite, brittle oasis in an empty world. And there were nights

when we heard a dismal howling of wolves, hunting round us; and evenings when, as the dusk strode out from between the sky and the world's edge, we could have sworn we saw distant horsemen moving on the snow, for that is a time of day when the plain is filled with shapes that have no real existence; and it may well be that the early evening was the most fearful time.

As for food, our guides were able to show us ways and means of getting it—not much, but quite sufficient to keep us on our feet. Those yellow men—shapeless bundles of clothing, on long-tailed horses so small that their riders' legs touched the ground; those men who seemed nothing if not morose and stupid—had a knowledge that made us pitiful by comparison. They knew where to find wood; and whenever a deer or a bear was within an hour's distance, somehow they knew of that, too. You discovered, travelling with them, that the wide land was not as empty as it seemed, that there were *zimovkas*—Mongol winter settlements—concealed every here and there, not far from the trail. Had we been alone we should have passed every one of them, without so much as knowing of their existence.

Our guides would ride off the trail to these places to catch what food was to be had, and Siberia cheated us royally. I remember one occasion when a Mongol returned from a journey of this sort with several large, icy chunks of something or other which he threw carelessly into the fire; we had, as always, asked for mutton and paid through the nose in advance.

"Venison," he mumbled, "all sheep stolen."

"I don't believe *that*," said the colonel, who had constituted himself as our leader, though there was little leading he could do. "Smells like horse meat." With which we agreed, because unfreezing horse meat has its own rather special smell, a smell that you distinctly prefer not to have around after you have once experienced it. "And it wouldn't be so bad," he added, "if it were young horse meat, but this fellow must have fought against Peter the Great."

And on that occasion, at least, I decided that I would get along without eating, even though it might be another twenty-four hours before we touched food again.

That was a strange procession, moving over the snow. Ladies in expensive furs, officers with ragged sheepskins over their uniforms, and the yellow Mongols leading, their bundled legs trailing from their shabby ponies. Well, if any one of these aristocrats ever had sent some unfortunate or other into Siberian exile, now they were learning just a little of what it meant: and, somehow or other, it was only the Mongols who did not seem degraded by that clean empty land.

Once the officers insisted that we should keep nearer the railroad, and it was then that I learned something about Mongols. They would not leave the trail, for fear of losing themselves; and at last, when we had argued with them for hours, they threatened to leave us. Then it was our turn to beg, though it seemed that nothing we could say would change their minds for them. The

white man will argue, right or wrong; but the yellow man, knowing he is right, will suffer arguments. His is a wiser logic. If you do not agree with him—then do what you think right. At last, we had to pay them more to keep them on the job. We had broken our contract, they said, by distrusting their ability to guide us, and now, if we wanted their services further, we must hire them again. When we took a vote on it, I voted for them; as did most of us, since there was little choice. But some of the “civilized” among us agreed with a very bad grace, boldly calling the Mongols yellow dogs and human animals . . . in French.

It must have been a good three weeks before we came to our first sign of civilization—a Russian village, differing little from the ordinary Mongol settlement, except that there were windows in these ramshackle huts, that a desolate little church stood in the middle of them, and that the whole place wore an air of abject misery which you would not find among the *zimovkas*.

A village, however, should mean a town or a city not far away, and not a few of us broke into a stumbling run along the trail, thinking that the end of our journey was almost in sight. But the place was empty, there was not a living soul in any of the huts, not a crumb of food; only the dead ashes on the floors, and—not far beyond the last hut—two or three White soldiers, perhaps four days dead. There had been a skirmish here, presumably a defeat for our side; and now there was not even a dog left to bark.

"How far to Irkutsk, for God's sake?" the colonel asked our guides.

"Week, ten days, walk."

"Can't you get us there any sooner?"

"*We* can," said the guide with ineffable contempt, "if you can."

Another idea: "How far is the railroad?"

The guide swept his hand across the far horizon—"Five hundred miles."

Should we leave them, and risk that journey by ourselves? There wasn't any sense in that; we had better go on to Irkutsk, and learn our fate. We went back through the huts once more searching for *valenkis*, or woollen boots, which you pull over the regular boots; but every hut was absolutely bare. It was from such wretched hamlets as these that we got our recruits for the Caucasus, men who went out of their heads at the very sight of a train, men who had been born and had lived and died without a hint of any world beyond this place. And what had happened to them all, what that complete evacuation meant and those dead soldiers, we could not guess and never learned. It was one of those secrets that are spoken to the plain only, and by the plain never disclosed.

Two days on, we came across a band of White army men, straggling hopelessly across the snow, who gave us news, but not the news we would have liked. Irkutsk, they said, had been a battlefield for many days, with victory still in the balance. General Semenov and the Czecho-Slovaks were fighting there. They themselves had been

sent out to guard the Trans-Siberian Railway, had been badly outnumbered, and driven off. They had wandered for days, and could still scarcely believe their luck in finding us. They were utterly exhausted, and gaunt with hunger; so we gave them food, and took them in with us—not too gracefully, since this meant more mouths to feed.

There was no doubt in our minds about going on to Irkutsk, for there was literally no alternative, now that even the railroad seemed to have fallen into Bolshevik hands. But the Mongols had gone into another of their gabbling conferences. and there they were, demanding more money. "There are more people to guide now," was their reason. The colonel started to draw his revolver at this, and I think he would have shot the Mongol leader then and there, if a lady had not laid her hand on his arm, and spoken to him softly in French. After all, the Mongols alone knew the way out over the trail, and if they deserted us now, we were as good as dead. So they got another fat sum—stating the amount they wanted and refusing to haggle.

The next morning, just before midday, a patch of the trail was darkened before us under the sun, and we discovered there a silent company of some two hundred dead men, frozen in the snow. Bolsheviks. No more than a look at that savage museum of death to see what army they belonged to. Cotton shirts covered their chests; elbows and arms were bare, feet bound in straw; in most cases they wore no underwear. Black heroes they were, blackened by the cold.



AFTER THE BATTLE NEAR IRKUTSK





These were the prelude to a once-populated country, for we passed villages five or six times in a day, but all silent, all deserted. It was at this time that Siberia at last laid its cold hand on me; for it was now that I began to think of dogs, the dogs that should have barked in those villages but didn't; and it was now that the vanguards of twilight would fill the plain for me with dogs, just beyond the corner of my eyesight, creeping on their bellies in the shadowy places. I never dared tell anybody, for fear that they would think I was demented.

And it was now that an utter weariness descended on us; and the ladies, who had hitherto surprised themselves and us by keeping on their feet, and who seemed, in one or two cases, almost to have thrived in the dry air, began to stumble and fall, and had to be supported. And seven days passed. And one morning we woke to find the Mongol escort gone, vanished into the countryside.

"Deserted," said the colonel, "gone to sell us to the Reds, I've no doubt. I wish to God I'd filled the yellow dogs full of bullets, when I'd the chance."

And we stood there, imagining an advance of Reds; telling one another, in unseemly panic, of the things they would do. "When they get hold of an officer," somebody said, "they make a hole in the ice and push him under: or they make officers dig their own graves and shoot each other." But I thought to myself that the black giant was awake and that he was ugly; and I thought of the black men, in the snow far behind, getting up from their frozen sleep, and striding down the trail behind us.

All morning we waited, expecting only the worst, and too weary to make any show of courage.

Midday. All was still.

And then—miles away, but no mistaking it—then the whistle of a train! We broke into a hoarse cheer. . . .

Irkutsk.

It was like the Mongols to bring us within hailing distance of the city and then leave us there. They had sold their services to us, they had kept their word, they had left without a handshake. They had more pride than we, in their own way, and more dignity; and with their departure, we saw the last of Siberia. The trail stretched clearly before us; we had only to follow, out of a waste whose purpose and meaning was riding away from us on the other side of the past night: six dirty yellow men, urging their shabby little horses towards home.

Men in civilian clothes were sent forward to scout, returning in about three hours to say that Irkutsk was only thirty miles away, and that there was a village about an hour ahead of us along the trail. Here we hired peasants as guides, and sleighs for the ladies, who, now that the end was almost in sight, discovered that they could not walk a step farther. But food we could not get—"Sorry, no food."

"What do you eat yourselves, then?"

"Mostly nothing," uttered a well-fed, rubicund face, which belonged to the village head man. There was obviously plenty of food hidden away somewhere; but, since we wanted to stay there for the night, we decided that it

was best not to try and force it from them at the point of a revolver. Yet it was a tradition that the Russian peasant was always hospitable, and would share his last crust with a stranger. This was what Revolution could produce—this blunt refusal.

And the next morning, when Irkutsk was four thin black towers on the level skyline, we met with Czecho-Slovak outposts, who told us that the city was altogether in their hands.

And by two o'clock we were standing in the railroad station. And that was the beginning of the end for me.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

### PROFITEER

IRKUTSK is warmth. I am not sure that I could call it a pleasant warmth, either, for until I began to thaw in the railroad station I had not realized how cold that Siberian march really was. And the penalty for becoming actually warm for the first time since I had left the train—now many hundreds of miles and over a month behind me—was an almost unbearable pain in my feet and legs, while the aching blood crept back.

Irkutsk is an unpleasant warmth; and what more?

It is also a new railroad pass, handed out by a White officer of whose appearance I remember nothing more than an enormous red nose, from the craggy tip of which there hangs a tiny and almost delicate dew drop.

It is also a hugely miserable crowd, examining the shell holes and grey broken houses along some of the most insignificant streets I have ever seen.

It is also a large plate of soup; a dish of potatoes, and raw, tough cutlets; a brown mole between the immense, descending breasts of the waitress as she bends over me; and a ten-kopeck tip, presented to the said breasts, more out of fear than gratitude.

In fact, Irkutsk is a four hours' wait; and I say good-bye to it now and for ever, as gladly as I did then. . . .

Beyond Irkutsk, Lake Baikal; as wide as an outer sea; a cold wind scolding its lame, little waves into an imitation of white horses. . . .

Beyond Baikal, April; April warmth, like a soft voice, spoken by the bare, yellow hills of Manchuria. And among the yellow people—who make a sort of frieze in my memory, group after carved group—the greenish khaki of Chinese soldiers, yellowish khaki of Japanese soldiers. I notice with surprise that the Chinese are altogether smarter. . . .

When we left the Manchurian border for Harbin, four new passengers entered my empty compartment: three girls and a man. The man claimed one's attention, and held it there in not altogether complimentary fascination. He was dressed in a loud grey and red checked suit, ending in yellow boots,—pausing at the swelling middle upon a heavy gold chain, hung with innumerable seals and trinkets; and beginning with a thick, purple neck, three chins, a little fat mouth, no nose to speak of, two kind, tiny pig's eyes, and a pinkish-grey soft hat. The hat, on removal, revealed a round expanse of greyish stubble. The whole was remarkably effective, in the sense that it was profoundly difficult to believe in.

This apparition stowed its three new suit-cases away with some effort, belched softly and begged the compart-

ment's pardon, dusted the seat with a blue and yellow silk handkerchief, pulled up its carefully creased trousers far enough to show an inch or two of woollen sock, and sank gratefully down.

The conclusion of this performance was greeted with a poorly suppressed giggle. It was only then that I had leisure to observe my three other companions.

I should call them the Grey Eyes, the Blue Eyes, and the Brown Eyes; since, though they were undoubtedly dressed in the height of fashion, I don't in the least remember what they wore—nearly four years of army life having deprived me of anything but simple amazement in front of beautiful clothes. They were lovely girls, and I do not forget that each one of them seemed a little careless about displaying her charms: that is to say, they were not merely three differently coloured pairs of eyes, but also three very tempting décolletés. And perhaps to a more experienced eye than mine was, they would represent, not the height of fashion, but its depth. But I am afraid that it would be useless to try to supply criticism now that I certainly did not make then.

The Grey Eyes, I discovered, were staring at me in rather a disconcerting manner; first at my face, then at my uniform—which no longer concealed, from a penetrating observer, the fact that I was not a boy. Indeed, the effect those Grey Eyes—fixed remorsefully on the centre button of my uniform—had upon me was to make me shrink into myself, putting my left hand a little clumsily on to my right shoulder.

"Want a liver sausage?" said the Eyes, at last, lighting up with a smile that was half malice and half friendliness.

I held out my hand, without speaking.

"How old are you?" she continued, unwrapping a very large white sandwich from its grease-proof paper, and handing it to me.

"Nineteen." I tried to hide my confusion by taking an enormous bite out of the sandwich; and the Eyes watched me, in gentle satisfaction, while I choked rather noisily as a result.

"Have another?" she said, when I had finished. I shook my head, altogether beyond speech.

"You're a girl, aren't you? . . . Oh, come now, don't cry about it. My name is Nadia. What's yours?"

"Marina Yurlova," I said, rubbing my left sleeve dismally across my eyes.

"Take my handkerchief," and a tiny square of lace and perfume gently inserted itself into my hand.

"I'm Sura," said the Brown Eyes, speaking for the first time. "Aren't you a Cossack?"

"Yes, of the Kuban," I answered, dabbing at my eyes with the already useless little square.

"I was in the Kuban once," she went on: she had a very low, rich voice, and there was only kindness in it. "At Anapas. Do you know Anapas?" I nodded, still beyond speaking. "And this," she said, pointing to the Blue Eyes, who responded with a little tinkle of laughter, like a musical box, "this is Sonya."

The Blue Eyes gave another little tinkling laugh and



said: "So now we all know one another except . . ." and she stared across at the corner seat where the red and grey checked apparition had been contemplating us all this time with an air at once furtive and paternal.

"Sokoloff," it gobbled, purple with eagerness and embarrassment. "Very proud to make your acquaintance, young ladies, very proud. . . ." And it exploded with a loud cough into the blue and yellow silk handkerchief.

"Well, Mr. Sokoloff," said Nadia, "since we are to be travelling companions, let me offer you a cheese sandwich. It's the last," she added pathetically, "but you are more than welcome to it."

At this Mr. Sokoloff emerged from his handkerchief like a jack-in-the-box, his little pig's eyes popping in consternation.

"Couldn't think of it," he stuttered, with a violent flourish of his stubby hand, "couldn't think of it. Here, let me . . ." and he fumbled in his baggage, produced a plated thermos bottle (the first I had ever seen in my life), unscrewed the top, and the compartment was suddenly invaded with a rich smell of coffee.

He watched us with the utmost delight as the thermos top was passed from hand to hand, his fingers trembling ecstatically each time he filled it up, his throat uttering (like something which did not belong to the rest of him) a series of painful gobbling noises.

"This is indeed a pleasure," he said at last. "Three charming young ladies and . . ." his throat laboured with another gobble ". . . were you of the Battalion of Death?" he asked me.

"No, I never saw them."

"A volunteer, then?"

"Yes, from the Caucasian front."

". . . and a volunteer," he remarked, completing his sentence with some triumph. At which he rose to his feet, executed the beginnings of a bow, smiled benevolently, and sank back again.

"Where are you going, Marina?" asked Sura.

"To Harbin."

"Great!" she exclaimed, with a perfectly genuine pleasure. "We live there—at least it's our home now."

"Yes, for now," repeated Sonya, cocking an eye at Mr. Sokoloff. "When the Bolsheviks took the Smolny Institute we were to go to Tobolsk to some institute there. But we three decided that it was a dangerous time to continue our education, and besides our parents were in the Crimea. So we thought we would go to Harbin and try to communicate from there. Then maybe to China. But we are stranded now," she added in gentle resignation.

"Poor children!" said Mr. Sokoloff, with another tremendous gobble, and I was surprised and horrified to see a fat tear squeeze itself from one of his little eyes. "Poor children. . . ." His throat worked a little under its weight of chins. "And what do you do for a living?" he produced at last. "It must be terribly difficult for you."

"It is *so* hard, Mr. Sokoloff," said Nadia, her voice drowned in sorrow, her beautiful grey eyes lowered. "Nobody will ever know what these Bolsheviks have done. They tore us away from comforts, from luxuries, from

gaiety, and have made our lives only a burden to live. We have to do laundry work."

I could have sworn that Sura was choking with laughter: she had her handkerchief in front of her eyes and her shoulders were trembling. Sonya stared rigidly out of the window—white teeth biting at the thin lips, white hands clenched in her lap—afraid to move her head, in case she, too, should burst into laughter. Only Nadia kept her melting grey eyes on the now prostrate Mr. Sokoloff.

The poor fat creature blew his nose violently, wiped his eyes, and began talking, more to himself than to us. "Gone, gone, gone. Gone are the good days. These poor children are the fruit of Revolution. And who wants Revolution? The working class got loose, and in my mind I think it was the work of Rodzianko. So these proud flowers of Russia must bend to laundry work. The shame of it; these white hands must coarsen in the suds. Shame, shame and disgrace. Yes," he added, in a loud angry voice, "I say shame, shame and disgrace."

At which he blew his nose again, replaced his handkerchief, drew out another one—upon whose red silk were printed the quite violent flags of all the allied nations—mopped his face, and pursued certain beads of perspiration into the purple valleys of his chin.

Then he suddenly thrust his hand into his coat pocket, took out a thick wallet, produced a five-hundred rouble note, and gave it to Nadia.

Her eyes opened wide to their full beauty. "Mr. Soko-

loff," she said, cooing like a dove at evening, "you don't have to do this. We'll get on somehow."

"Take it, my dear, take it. I can well afford it. This is just a little tribute to beauty in distress. And you, Miss Sura . . ."

Another five-hundred rouble note. Sura showed no disposition to laugh now. "Mr. Sokoloff, may God be good to you."

Sonya's delicate face was sharp with anxiety; her blue eyes pierced into the wallet. "And Miss Sonya . . ." She just suppressed a sigh of relief. "Mr. Sokoloff, I shall always remember you in my prayers," and she raised her eyes to the compartment ceiling, as though she were already mentioning Mr. Sokoloff's name before the throne.

"Thank you, my dear. A little prayer, that is the best reward you can give me. And the volunteer . . ." he added, producing a fourth note and handing it across to me.

This was something of a shock. "Mr. Sokoloff," I stammered. "I'm going to the hospital and there we are all taken care of very well. I'm sure I shall not need money." Looking up, I caught Nadia's lovely face contorted with a wink, her lovely mouth shaping an agonized, soundless "take it."

"You take it just the same, my little Cossack," said the unconscious Mr. Sokoloff. "Buy yourself some ladies' clothing and forget this war business . . . it's all over now, anyway, for you. Yes, I would get married if I were you. I would suggest an Englishman. They make wonderful husbands."

It was interesting to see the way in which the three disposed of their money. Nadia stared at the melting Sokoloff, folded her note into a lace handkerchief, and pushed it slowly down between her white breasts. Sura pulled a wallet from the lining of her coat, and put hers there. Sonya's little music box of a laugh tinkled sharply and she whipped her skirts up almost to the thigh, and pushed the note into her stocking top—the whole performance being completed, as from long practice, in the twinkling of an eye. Sonya, obviously, was the least subtle of the three.

As for my note, it went far into the bandage on my wrist.

"Does anyone want some tea? No? A game of cards, perhaps?"

The lamps had been lit not long before, and now a good-looking young officer was standing in the compartment door, staring rather insolently at Sonia. "Cards!" said that young lady, bearing his scrutiny without noticeable discomfort. "What a brilliant idea. Let's play bridge."

"We have cards in our compartment," the officer volunteered, his eyes still on Sonia's face.

"Poker is more in my line"—this from Mr. Sokoloff.

The lieutenant looked at him then for the first time, and shrugged his shoulders. "We are too poor to play poker," he said, scarcely disguising his contempt.

Mr. Sokoloff, however, concealed his soft heart beneath

an almost elephantine skin. "I might have thought of that," he answered genially. "Well, you come to our compartment, and bring your cards with you. I have candy for the ladies, drinks for the gentlemen, good cigarettes for everybody, and . . ." he produced his last invitation with the manner of a conjurer whose single aim in life is to astonish and flatter his audience, "at the next station where—unless I am wrong—there is an excellent restaurant, you shall all be my guests at dinner."

At which the young officer, whose expression gradually changed from contempt to amusement and from amusement to respect, clicked his heels, saluted, and left.

He returned with two others—"Captain Lebedev, Lieutenant Petroff, and myself, Lieutenant Sokoloff."

"Sokoloff? Why, that is my name. Where are you from, Lieutenant?"

"From Tobolsk, Mr. Sokoloff."

"I'm not from there," said Mr. Sokoloff rapidly, "I'm a Muscovite. Well, make yourselves at home, make yourselves at home. These three young ladies and this volunteer have kindly offered to join us. You tell them your names, girls, I am not good at that. Then we will play bridge, though I am not good at that either," and he rattled along at a great pace, while his suit-case was upended for a table, and the seven of them cut cards for partners. . . .

When we pulled up at our station two hours later, Mr. Sokoloff waddled ahead of us into a brilliantly lighted, first-class restaurant, thronged with what appeared to be

the uniforms of all nations; or, to be quite explicit, containing round its centre table two French infantry lieutenants, one British naval captain—quite drunk, a Japanese officer of indeterminate rank, a colonel of the Ural Cossacks, and an intensely solemn Chinese civilian. These I shall not forget because they restrained the British captain—with some difficulty and in a perfect Babel of languages—from taking their last bottle of champagne, and offering it to our ladies, who were standing haughtily by the door, talking to their escorts, and waiting to be provided with seats.

Mr. Sokoloff seized a passing waiter by the sleeve, pressed a five-rouble note in his hand, threw one look of purple indignation at the international table (where the British captain, to the fury of our Russian officers, was now throwing expansive kisses in our direction) and shouted at the top of his voice: "A table for eight, and the best dinner you have in the house—never mind the cost!" Nor did his accustomed smile return until we were all seated comfortably in a far corner, and the waiter planted two screens between us and the other nations of the world.

As for the dinner—from apéritifs to coffee—I am so little of an epicure that I have forgotten it; indeed, none of its no-doubt excellent dishes could have been so amazing as the extreme formality which cloaked Mr. Sokoloff from the moment the soup appeared upon the table. He was a liberal spender, but a self-conscious and uncomfortable host; and he was scarcely himself again

until we had left the restaurant and were seated once more in our compartment.

Food, it appeared—or rather dead food, the memory of food—was his favourite theme, and, after he had held a detailed post-mortem on our late dinner, he told us several stories of the banquets he had given at which—if he was to be believed—his table had been graced by any number of royal and noble friends. “Once at Christmas,” he related, his little mouth slack and wet, his little pig’s eyes gleaming with excitement, “I chartered a heated train to bring fresh strawberries, raspberries, and vegetable from Italy. That dinner cost me ten thousand roubles and it was only for twenty-five people!”

Oh well, Mr. Sokoloff, you were a kind-hearted man even if you were a little comic. And I doubt if you received, or demanded, any more for your money than a single pat upon Sonya’s sharp little knee, and you did that with such a timid air that it was almost pathetic. Even I, who had little knowledge of a certain side of life, realized that those young ladies were not quite all that they pretended to be; that Sonya’s stocking top and Nadia’s white bosom had known the crackle of easy money before; that Sura’s exquisite hands had never cheapened themselves in a laundry. But did you?

I shall not forget your going to bed that night. The girls had drifted out “to get a breath of fresh air,” and to talk French with the officers (French which you could not understand, Mr. Sokoloff, which perhaps accounted for your stiffness at dinner). So we were alone together, you



and I. I was lying so quietly in the upper bunk that you had forgotten all about me, and you were pottering here and there, putting things away, arranging your bed for the night. "I must only take my coat and boots off," you said, talking out loud to yourself, "as there are young ladies in the compartment."

And the lower bunk opposite me groaned under your weight; and I leaned over and caught a glimpse of your round stubbed head, your tired fat face, your noisy red-striped shirt, your two dimpled hands folded on the grey and red checked mountain of your belly, your sensible woollen socks which somehow pronounced sentence upon the cheapness of all the rest of you. . . .

And then you began to snore.

I climbed down from my bunk after a while, with enormous care and difficulty, took the five-hundred rouble note from my bandages, and pushed it gently beneath his pillow. He never stirred; he lay there, his mouth open, snoring away in the final indignity of sleep.

Then I climbed back once more, making as little noise as possible, and waited for the girls to return. I fell into a light doze, and when I came out of it Mr. Sokoloff was still snoring, and the girls were still absent. And early the next morning, when I woke again and for good, there was still no sign of them. So now I know, what I scarcely guessed that day, that—fortified with Mr. Sokoloff's fifteen hundred roubles, and Mr. Sokoloff's excellent plum brandy, and Mr. Sokoloff's good red wine—three young ladies, driven by the Revolution from an aristocratic

school, were letting three White officers do exactly as they pleased with them.

Mr. Sokoloff was a war profiteer, you see; a class of man which was certainly responsible for the Revolution. Life has odd ways of revenging itself.

Three hours later, we all had breakfast together at the Harbin station, again at Mr. Sokoloff's expense, who did not seem to realize that he had spent his night alone with the "volunteer," or to question the appearance of a crumpled five-hundred rouble note beneath his pillow. The officers and the young ladies appeared to be very hungry, and scarcely needed their host's insistence that they should repeat their orders of boiled eggs and coffee. . . .

He wept a little when we saw him off on his train. He was going to America, and he took our names down in his note-book, so that he could "write to us from the other side." I remember a dreadful tear, creeping down his squat little nose and falling obscenely on the name "Yurlova."

And the third bell rang, and the great engine moved out, and soon Mr. Sokoloff was nothing more than a red silk handkerchief waving from a distant window.

We stood there until he was out of sight.

Then: "At last the old soul is gone," says Sura. And Nadia adds: "He wasn't a bad old fish."

And Sonya opens her little red mouth; and her thin, tinkling laughter follows Mr. Sokoloff to America.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

### THE SMOLNY INSTITUTE GIRLS: 1919

BEFORE we left the station we arranged to meet there again at half-past five that evening. Then we went our several ways—the officers to report at headquarters, the girls to their “laundry,” and I to the station office where I inquired if there was an American hospital at Harbin. He answered that I would have to go on to Vladivostok for that, but when I said that I wanted to stay in Harbin for a month, he told me that I could put up at a city hospital just across the street.

A nurse on duty took off all my clothes and gave me a woman’s nightshirt, very much to my disgust: then, to make matters worse, she put me in a ward with six other women. “Isn’t there a military ward here, for regular soldiers?” I asked her, looking at my female companions with a mixture of embarrassment and fear. Her only reply was a face so frozen with disapproval that I decided to let the matter rest for the time being.

But my fellow patients were not so minded. Hearing that I was a soldier, they could not contain their curiosity, and wandered over one by one, staring at me as though I

were a dumb animal, sizing me up. At last the whole six of them, as unpleasant a lot of women as I have ever seen, were gathered round my bed; and it was some few minutes before their gaping silence was broken by a flat-chested, grey-haired hag whose face, lopsided by some obscure swelling, suddenly opened with a shrill "Can you shoot?"

I turned over on my side and began to snore.

"Did you kill anybody?" asked a treacly voice which belonged, I am fairly sure, to a pink-cheeked youngish mountain woman with sore eyes.

I snored a little louder.

"Maybe she's drunk," said somebody at last; and with that they shuffled back to their beds.

Lunch was so filled with spices that I could hardly bring myself to taste it, so I turned up my nose at it, lay back on the pillows, and closed my eyes.

"Are you sick?" asked the nurse.

I opened my eyes wearily.

"No, madam."

"Why don't you eat, then?"

"She's drunk," volunteered the treacly voice.

But I had begun to snore again.

The women whispered together; visitors from other wards came and went mysteriously; a clock wheezed out the hours and the half hours. At three o'clock I thought it was time for me to get ready to meet my friends, so, amidst a positive tempest of whispers from the other beds, I got up and went to look for the nurse.

"Can I have my clothes, please? I have an engagement for five o'clock which I should like to keep."

Her mouth fell open in astonishment, and shut again like a trap. "This is a hospital," she said harshly, "not a hotel."

"But nurse, in all military hospitals soldiers can come and go as they please, provided they are not sick."

"I don't know anything about the ways of military hospitals. You must speak to the doctor on duty."

But the doctor, when I found him, repeated the nurse's remark about hospitals and hotels. "If you want to check out, you can," he said, "but you can't come and go."

"All right, doctor, I will check out." And without any further comments, except an ill-tempered laugh, he noted down my name and "illness"—"wounded in the right arm"—and I went back to the nurse, who gave me my clothes with an air of undisguised relief.

But she consented to bandage my arm for me, washing the wound with alcohol in the operating room, and behaving very generously with the cotton when she bound it up again. And when I said good-bye to her, she even unfroze sufficiently to call me her dear. I am sure she was a thoroughly nice woman.

I hung about at the station until half-past five, when the officers arrived, the girls appearing in something of a hurry at six o'clock. They seemed to think that the station restaurant was the right place for dinner, and so it was not until after dark that I had my first sight of Harbin.

People have told me since that Harbin is beautiful, and exotic, and tantalizing; and have talked about the lights, strung like a necklace along its crooked streets, and the fantasy of its silken banners, and the violent contrast between the Old Town and the New, rickshaw and *drosbky*, Chinese and Russian. It may well be all that and more: but to me it was a dirty labyrinth, a violet shadow stained with little pools of lamplight, a ragged opening above my head filled with the obscure night. For the girls took us straight from the station to the Old Town: and the Old Town, on an April night laden with the threat of rain, was like any other Chinese quarter in any other town in the world.

We ended at a dilapidated wooden building, its narrow entrance flanked by a laundry on the one side and a grocer's shop, I think, on the other. A flight of dingy stairs, soiled with the light of a single paraffin lamp, crawled reluctantly into an unpleasing darkness.

Sonya turned to the officers. "This isn't much of a place, I'm afraid," she said, "but you can come up if you like and meet the rest of our famous Smolny Institute girls. The fruit of the Revolution, as Mr. Sokoloff said, and believe me it's pretty rotten fruit."

The officers—though they gazed at one another uncertainly, somewhat taken aback at this invitation—nevertheless climbed the stairs, which received us with an ancient creaking, and delivered us at the door of what once must have been the laundry drying room. It was a large room, indifferently lighted. It was un-furnished

with five camp beds, a torn green silk couch, and a hideous red lacquer wardrobe. It had two occupants—a fat girl and a thin girl. The fat girl, who was introduced as Katja, was seated on some newspapers on the floor, spearing sardines out of a tin with a match-stick, and eating sweet coffee cake between sardines. She acknowledged the introduction with a grunt.

The thin girl was lying on the couch with her hands under her head, staring fixedly at a cobweb on the ceiling as though her thoughts were centred on something better than this world. She looked very ill and entirely aristocratic, and I have no doubt that she was both. Her name, it appeared, was Sasha.

The officers tried to get these two to go out with them and eat but, the invitation meeting with nothing more than a languid smile from Sasha, they suggested rather desperately that they should fetch some food themselves and bring it back with them.

"No, thank you," said Katja, speaking for the first time in a surprisingly small, sweet voice, "I have just devoured a tin of sardines and some French pastry, and I am about to follow Sasha's example. She had the first tin and, as you can see, her thoughts are already in a better world."

The atmosphere of the room, already stale and damp, began sensibly to thicken with female boredom. The officers hemmed and hawed and broke into little fragments of speech; and at last, confronted with the obvious pink cavern of Nadia's yawn, hastily made their excuses

and almost fled from the room. The Smolny Institute girls might have unnerved better men.

As their feet stumbled away from us down the groaning staircase, Sasha stretched her arms, yawned impolitely, and said:

"Thank God, the pups have gone."

"Yes," Nadia agreed, "I don't know why we bother with them. They never have any money, and they generally end by giving you the sickness."

Sura crossed herself rapidly. "Take it back, Nadia," she begged. "Think of last night . . ."

Nadia shrugged her pretty shoulders. "If it comes," she said indifferently, "it comes."

The unwieldy Katja got to her feet at this and remarked, in her neat and lovely little voice: "Well, *kurvy*, how about that party?" And I nearly swallowed my tongue in astonishment, for *kurvy* is a common army expression for "prostitutes."

The word "party" quite suddenly filled the room with action. Sasha slid off her couch in an instant. "My God," she said, "what's the time?" "Nine o'clock," Katja answered, and added, her gentle voice contriving more combinations of filthy language than I had heard from any drunken soldier, "we're late as it is, all because you three——had to waste your time with some——pups."

The others began to undress in a great hurry, swearing amongst themselves: nor is there anything stranger in my mind than Nadia's slim white body exploding out of its last garment with a perfectly monstrous oath. They put on



the daintiest underwear I had ever seen, but their outside dresses were black, or dark blue, or brown. And when they were all ready, Nadia turned to me and said:

"Come on with us, Marina. We are invited to a Chinese dinner. Lots of fun."

I wondered what I ought to do. It was the thought of staying all night alone in that place which finally drove me out with them.

We traversed a number of dark alleys—*lurking* alleys, in which the very echoes of our feet took on a shape of their own, and crowded on our heels like enemies; plunging at last into a brightly lit boulevard, which seemed to be filled with uniforms of all nationalities, though we crossed it so rapidly that I had little leisure to take it in.

We made for one of the best-looking restaurants; spoke for a moment with the Chinese doorman, who then opened his door with undue familiarity—that is to say, he dealt the laughing Katja a gentle blow on her fat buttocks; crossed the lounge, a teakwood plateau raised above the shouting brilliance of the dining room; and climbed a short flight of stairs.

At the head of this was a heavy, rose silk curtain, and beyond the curtain a Chinese boy, and beyond the boy a dark, empty corridor, filled with the relics of a long neglect—dust, cigarette ends, yellow shreds of newspaper, and two or three broken-down chairs. The boy, who had greeted our arrival with a further emptying of his already empty face, preceded us down the corridor into a large

hall, the sole furniture of which was a grand piano and a bench, and which smelled vaguely of the incense they used to burn in the Cathedral at Ekaterinodar.

A faint sound of merry-making came into this place from below, a weak clatter of dishes; its single window opened on to an uninviting slab of damp night; two dim, bronze hanging lamps could not conceal the extreme cleanness of its polished floor. It was probably the most unfriendly place in Harbin, or so I thought.

Katja, whose sullenness had left her from the moment we had entered the boulevard outside, now tripped—in spite of her bulk, there is no other way to describe her walk—tripped over to the grand piano, and settled herself with much laughter on the bench.

And stopped laughing.

Her plump face, whose tragically innocent mouth surely had never pronounced the word *kurry*, stared carefully through the ceiling. She sat there for nearly a minute, her quiet hands laid on the keys. Then she began to play.

The rest of us were sitting on the floor, with our backs against the wall; and for an instant, in the uncertain light, I caught a glimpse of a new Sura, her whole face renewed with an unconquerable innocence. Nor did any of us move. For what Katja played was beautiful and sad, beyond my telling.

It was Sasha who broke the spell. She got up from the floor, pale and angry, strode over to Katja, and pulled her roughly from the bench. "You *would* spoil good humour

with your dying classics," she said. "Stop it, won't you?" Katja made no protest, but came over to the wall, and sat limply down beside us. Then she started laughing.

(I wish Mr. Sokoloff could have had a vision of this room and what was happening in it, and what was going to happen, before he started making bad boots, or lending money, or whatever it was that brought him his fortune in the war: or would it take more than Katja's annihilated laughter to stop the Sokoloffs of this world from plunging it where it has gone?)

Sasha, now seated at the piano, banged out some soldier tunes, by which means she contrived to make the piano sound like a third-rate instrument in an unspeakable music hall; after which she sang risqué songs, the words sprouting like a sickness from her aristocrat's face. The others paid no attention to her at all. It was only I who seemed to care whether she stopped or not.

And then a part of the wall opened, swinging outwards like a door; and there, beyond the wall, was a dining-room; and in the middle of the dining-room a table, laden with flowers and bottles. Two Chinese waiters bowed to us to come in.

The dining-room was not very large, its walls hung with the same heavy rose silk that had confronted us at the head of the staircase. It was dimly lit enough for me to think the whole scene very luxurious, as perhaps it really was; and I began to feel extremely out of place in my heavy overcoat and uniform.

The girls wandered round the table, sniffing the

flowers, fingering the bottles, laughing amongst themselves: and while they were so engaged, a piece of the rose silk curtain was drawn back, and through the blackness beyond it there entered five Chinese gentlemen.

I have no way of describing these, since all Chinese looked very nearly the same to me: all I can say is that three of the Gentlemen were fat, and two were thin; that the thin Gentlemen wore thin, black, drooping moustaches, and the fat Gentlemen no moustaches at all; that they were all dressed in rich brocades of a very sombre, not to say ugly, shade of blue; that they all wore skull caps. They did not have a pig-tail among them; their hands were carefully manicured; they smoked Russian cigarettes. They all spoke what sounded to me like very fluent French.

And—though this is merely an impression, not backed with knowledge—they did not seem to be first-class Gentlemen but rather, if such a thing is at all possible, the Chinese equivalent of Mr. Sokoloff.

A waiter brought in a tray of yellow drinks, so strong that I set mine down after the first sip, whereupon Katja emptied the glass for me; then more drinks appeared; then a buffet. And dinner began.

It was the longest dinner I have experienced, and the dulllest. The rose silk hangings, or so it seemed, gradually and definitely quenched whatever gaiety there may have been; and, to make matters worse, I sat between Sonya and Sasha, neither of them very friendly at best and both now engaged in speaking French with their partners.

Dish after dish was set down before us—one of the fat Gentlemen eating only Chinese dishes, the girls only European, and the rest of the Gentlemen sampling everything in sight. The cigarettes, which they smoked constantly, slowly drowned the lamplight. I tried to drink a little of the wine, but it only made me more sleepy. Nobody spoke to me. My head began to nod.

The piano sounded a harsh, mutilated tango from the other room, the dining-room was empty; my head lay on the table between two teacups and a tall bottle of wine. I got to my feet and staggered through the partition.

And stood there, swaying a little on my feet, surveying the outer room.

Four of the Gentlemen were seated on four silk cushions along the wall; the fifth, youngish and thin, stood by Sasha at the piano. Beside three of the Gentlemen lay Sonya, Nadia and Sura; the fourth occupied his cushion alone.

But for a moment my attention was concentrated on Katja, who stood by herself in the middle of the room, laughing immoderately, with what sounded, and still sounds, like an entirely inhuman laughter. The floor around her was littered with twisted five-rouble notes, which the Gentlemen had apparently been throwing at her; also, at a farther distance, with Katja's dress.

She was in a pink silk chemise, one stocking, and her loosened hair—brown, angry hair, which somehow did not at all belong to the rest of her. She was flushed and panting with exertion, and it seemed that she had just

been dancing, for the tango died on a harsh discord just as I came in.

They did not see me at first; not until I had realized why the three girls, sprawling beside their Gentlemen against the wall, had been so careful to put on lovely underclothes; not until the temporarily unoccupied Gentleman on the fourth cushion had set up a bawl of "*Marche! Marche!*"

Katja turned to Sasha, who nodded her arrogant head, seized a glass from the hand of the thin Gentleman beside her, drained it, lit a cigarette, and began to play some kind of parody of a Russian military march. It was at this point that Sonya recognized me.

She whispered something in the ear of the fattest of the three fat Gentlemen, unwound her thin and naked arm from his neck, got to her feet with the extreme care of a very drunk person, and came mincing uncertainly across to me. "Come along," she said; and as I followed her obediently across the floor, being altogether too frightened to resist, I noticed that Katja was now removing her only stocking.

"Sit down," said Sonya, and pushed me none too gently on to the lap of the fat Gentleman, who looked at me through incalculable slit eyes and began—with his gentle and implacable fingers—to stroke me from my shoulder down to my knee. I looked wildly to the left of me, where Nadia—also entirely drunk—sat on the knees of the second thin Gentleman.

"*Marche, alors!*" shouted the unoccupied Gentleman.

"*Marche, marche!*" And the piano played louder, and Katja, still in her pink chemise, set up a ridiculous parody of a soldier going through his rifle drill. And then, for this was no doubt part of a performance which the two had given before, Sasha changed her tune without pausing into the Wedding March. . . .

Nadia and her companion got up together and left the room.

. . . And Katja broke off, ran over to the unoccupied Gentleman, threw herself across his knees and shook with laughter; the first thin Gentleman skilfully inserted himself between Sasha and the piano bench; a yellow forefinger began to meddle with the middle button of my uniform.

"I don't want you," I screamed. "I don't want you!"

"Little fool," said Sonya, teetering on her feet beside the wall. The yellow forefinger was busy with my button. "Let me go," I said, little above a whisper now. "Oh, please let me go." And Sura, jerking herself upright beside me, leaned over and talked fiercely in French; and I found myself on my feet, with Sura beside me.

"Go downstairs," she said rapidly, "and get a rickshaw outside, and get yourself taken away. If you stay here much longer I shan't be able to help you." She gave me a little push towards the door.

I can see them very clearly, just once more before I go. Sura's brown eyes are filled with misery and fear. Sonya yells: "Little bitch, you don't know what's good for you," her tinkling music box of a laugh cracked with drunken

anger. Katja raises her plump face and looks at me with a complete lack of recognition. And Sasha—quite sober, quite the aristocrat, sitting remotely on the knees of her thin Gentleman—Sasha offers me the perfect discourtesy of her smile.

I ran down the corridor, thrust aside the silk curtain, descended the stairs, pushed past the doorman—who tried, none too eagerly, however, to detain me, found a rickshaw outside, and ordered it to the station.

It was almost morning.

At nine o'clock the commandant appeared; he signed my papers without a murmur, and told me I could take the ten o'clock train. And the train carried me away. There was no one to see me off, or to wish me God speed; only the wind-blown sandy hills of Harbin, crowding down to the track's edge, waved me an idiotic farewell.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

### DEPARTURE

As we drew near Vladivostok the scenery began to change: it seemed almost as if some fortunate wind had blown all the seeds of all the trees in Manchuria on to the stubborn hills I saw there. Oak and lime and cork and ash and aspen and wild cherry—and other trees which I have neither the knowledge nor the memory to name—shone among a tangled undergrowth beneath long shafts of watery sunshine. But as we came in the sky lowered, and the city itself was sheeted in rain.

I was told that the American Hospital lay in a quarter known as "Rotten Corner"; so I took a tramcar, and began a long journey across the city. Through the rain-dimmed windows I could make out only the blurred outlines of fine buildings—handsome erasures, they were no more than that. And when at last the tramcar reached its terminus, in a quarter of mean houses, I was told that the Hospital was still some way ahead.

The rain had decreased to a shower and then it ceased altogether. As I left the houses behind and walked in open country, a weak sunset was already staining the fields with



THE AUTHOR BEFORE HER ESCAPE TO JAPAN



shadows and finding a green reflection of itself among the shallow pools on either side of me. The road stretched empty ahead, a series of ragged mud holes, gleaming from the rain. And at last I came across two Chinese, carrying vegetables on their shoulders, who told me in sibilant Russian that my destination was "little walk ahead."

It may have been three miles before I arrived there.

My story has been punctuated with hospitals, good and bad—Baku, Tiflis, Moscow, Kazan, Omsk—and if I say that this American Hospital at Vladivostok was quite perfectly run, quite perfectly kind, is there any more to tell? My tale has almost run its course, and I am anxious now to come to the end of it, as a traveller in sight of the inn an eye's length ahead of him. And what better tribute to perfection can there be than the tribute of silence?

They kept me there some three weeks; they would not let me hear of the new course of Revolution; they told me that I should go to Sulphur Springs in Japan; they got me a passport and a passage. If my entrance into the War was muddled, and my stay lengthy, my leaving of it was just as simple as that.

And, to keep the records straight, I must say that the Legation had no news of my Czecho-Slovak Captain. He, too, deserves the tribute of silence.

I should have liked to say my last good-bye to Russia in the morning or at sunset; I should have liked to see the coast line fading in the sea-lit air, or drowned with gold. I could have had ambitions then, and fears and regrets;

with Raevskaya now irrevocably behind me, and the East only a thought still to grow up from the sea. I should have been an adventurer, facing the large, clean world. . . .

But it didn't happen that way. The sea was deadly cold, still haunted with the ice crusts of April; rain had only ceased at midday; as we left the Gulf of St. Peter a long grey afternoon emptied itself into the vats of sky and water.

And, I, too, was drained of hope and of fear; I had no regret for the past and no sense of the future.

Slowly behind the Golden Horn of Vladivostok became a humped, dissolving outline; slowly ahead of me the evening fog, tangible and empty, crept out and covered the sea.

END





